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*Flashpoints*

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Some details in the anecdotal stories used in this book have been altered slightly to preserve the privacy of the individuals involved.

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# FINDING YOUR FLASHPOINT

SOMEONE ONCE ASKED Jean Cocteau, the French writer, artist, and film director, what he would take if his house were on fire and he could remove only one thing. He replied, “I would take the fire.”

*“I would take the fire.”*

In one sense, Cocteau’s answer seems an obvious, almost practical solution. Take the fire from a burning building, and the building will no longer burn. But I think he may have meant it in another way. As a writer and an artist, he knew that fire—*passion*—is an indispensable ingredient in the creative process. And if he could have only one thing, he would take the fire every time.

Passion—that fire in the belly—is the catalyst of every vibrant life, whether it’s lived in Paris, France, or in Small-town, USA. It’s as vital to the young mother at home as it is to the corporate executive. The fire of passion can change a life, and one passionate life can change the world.

## THE IRRESISTIBLE FORCE OF FIRE

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Any firefighter will tell you that fire is predictably unpredictable. Under the right circumstances even a small fire can pose a great danger. If a blaze reaches the flash point, sometimes called the flashover temperature, every bit of combustible material in the room—wood, paper, carpet, drapes, and furniture—will explode into flame. The fire doesn't even have to touch anything in order to spread. A confined blaze will heat the atmosphere in the room until *everything* in the enclosed space spontaneously ignites. If it can burn, at the flash point it will.

If we apply the same principle to the world of ideas, the result is equally explosive. When dormant passions burst into flame, and ideas spontaneously ignite, everything within our circle of influence will be changed forever. As frightening and dangerous as a fiery flash point can be, a “flashpoint” of the heart can set the world on fire!

Has this ever happened to you? A small fire—a dream, a hope, a desire—smoldering quietly within the confines of your heart, begins to edge toward the flashover temperature. You begin to feel the heat, and as your passion grows, so does your inspiration, motivation, and determination. Suddenly, status quo is no longer satisfactory. You must take action. You won't be content until the flame of your spirit kindles a wild-fire in your soul, transforming your life and the lives of others. The flashpoint occurs when you are compelled to make a change—or make a difference—no matter what the cost.

Some of us, however, are like the sprinkler system in an office building. At the first sign of heat or smoke (natural by-products of every hot new idea), we've conditioned ourselves to spray cold water on even the barest flame of

desire. Maybe that was how we were raised. Or maybe it's just plain fear. But it doesn't have to be that way.

If you have had a flashpoint experience, you know how it has changed your perspective. If you have not yet experienced a flashpoint and its revolutionary aftereffects, you can—and you *will*—by simply opening your eyes to the opportunities around you. If you refuse—if you choose to stay stuck right where you are, you may miss the fullness of life that God intended for you.

In the movie *The Sixth Sense*, a little boy with unusual powers looks up at the character played by Bruce Willis and says, “I see dead people.” As I look at the world around me, I have something in common with that little boy. I see dead people, too, but they're still walking around in the flesh. Their eyes reflect the sorry truth that their soul has become shriveled and dry and desperate. They've lost their purpose and reason for living—or they've never found it. Their lives are a grind, and they feel victimized by everyone and everything. Their deadness is emotional and spiritual rather than physical, but they are no less dead. The good news is they don't have to *stay* that way.

If I've just described your life, this book may be the spark that leads to a life-changing flashpoint. I pray that it is.

## A DINNER THAT CRYSTALLIZED MY OUTLOOK

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Several years ago, I was privileged to be among a group invited to a dinner with former president Gerald Ford and former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. (I know, I know—Billy Graham and Mother Teresa both told me I shouldn't name-drop.) President Ford arrived first, and with genuine warmth

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and a statesman's air, he walked to each person in the room, greeted him or her with a smile and a handshake, then stepped back to await Mr. Gorbachev's arrival.

I happened to be standing near the entrance when Mr. Gorbachev's bodyguard opened the double doors. The Russian statesman walked straight toward me, shook my hand, and through his interpreter said it was good to see me. He asked if we had met before, remarking that I looked familiar. I assured him that this was our first meeting because I would never have forgotten the privilege.

As we settled into our seats, I was struck by the friendliness of both Mr. Gorbachev and President Ford, especially in contrast to the chilly self-importance of another dignitary, a prominent minister, who had also been invited. Unlike the two national leaders, this man greeted no one but the guests of honor. The rest of us seemed invisible.

As the evening proceeded, I was inspired and awed by the sense of watching history unfold in the presence of these two great men. I later realized that both Gorbachev and Ford had had flashpoint experiences that had not only changed their own lives but the course of history.

Gerald Ford's flashpoint came when he pardoned Richard Nixon, a difficult and controversial decision that probably cost him the 1976 election. Remarkably, he made the decision despite the personal consequences. Only recently have historians begun to recognize Ford's courage in pardoning Nixon. The impeachment proceedings involving President Bill Clinton showed how the nation might have been distracted from more important issues had Nixon been prosecuted after leaving office. Gerald Ford's steadfast wisdom was

needed at that moment in history, and he sacrificed himself to act on his convictions.

Likewise, when Mikhail Gorbachev's flashpoint moment arrived, he was willing to sacrifice his personal interests for the sake of his country. By then he had already established himself as a man of high standards and principles. For example, when he was in college, he and his family had very little money. For clothing he had only one suit, one tie, and one white dress shirt. But he would not allow himself to look shabby among his classmates. Every day for four years he cleaned that one outfit and pressed his one shirt so he would be as well dressed as his peers.

At the dinner, Gorbachev spoke of the moment he realized that communism could not and should not endure. As he had risen in office, he gained greater access to data about the Soviet Union's strengths and weaknesses. In studying this information, he became increasingly aware that he and the Russian people were victims of a great deception, and he was stunned when he learned that the USSR was financially unstable and had few resources for economic correction. Although at first he was unwilling to admit the truth, he began to see that the system he had believed in and lived for was a sham. He knew it could not survive, and he began to believe that it *should* not survive. He explained that he finally realized that all he had been taught was false, and from that moment on he felt compelled to expose the lies of past communist leaders. Although the Russian people have suffered through severe financial difficulties in the transition between communism and democracy, they have moved toward a better way of life since Gorbachev's change of heart. And as a further result of Gorbachev's flashpoint, the cold war ended, the Berlin Wall

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came down, and the political affairs of the world were forever altered.

As I reflected on that evening and my encounters with those two statesmen, I realized how powerful and world-changing an individual flashpoint could be.

## FLASHPOINTS ARE NOT GENDER SPECIFIC

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Men don't hold the franchise on flashpoints. Plenty of women around the world have changed and influenced the lives of others through their own life-changing flashpoint experiences.

Princess Diana, weary of living in a glass palace, took royalty to the streets and to the hospital beds of suffering children. She could have remained cloistered in the comfort of her royal life of luxury, but she saw an opportunity to express the fullness of her heart and responded. And though her life was cut short, she made a difference.

Mother Teresa could have chosen the sterile halls of any hospital in the world, but instead she chose the filthy streets of Calcutta, India, where the sick and the dying lie in the gutters like discarded bags of trash. Along with the Sisters of Mercy, she made it her mission to ensure that the poor of Calcutta would at least die with dignity.

Rosa Parks changed the course of our nation when she refused to move to the back of the bus. In a flashpoint of insight, anger, and persistence, she ignited a firestorm of change that still burns brightly in our society today. Her steadfast resistance to prejudice and inequality became a rallying point for those who sought to bring equal protection and fairness under the law to people of all races.



In 1987, Georgia Nucci received word that her only daughter, Jennifer, an exchange student in Ecuador, had contracted hepatitis. By the time Georgia and her husband arrived in Ecuador to care for their daughter, Jennifer was in a coma. A few days later, she died.

A few months after the grieving parents returned home to Claverack, New York, their nineteen-year-old son, Christopher, left for England to spend a semester abroad in a Syracuse University overseas program. Returning home on December 21, 1988, he boarded Pan Am Flight 103 and died when a terrorist bomb destroyed the plane over Lockerbie, Scotland.

“For about a month after each child died,” Georgia told *Parade* magazine, “it was as if I had had major surgery. I felt physically battered. That kind of grief is very physical. I hurt as if there was a trail of blood behind me.”

Georgia set about doing things to ease the terrible burden of grief she bore. She helped the other stricken parents of Flight 103 by collecting stories and compiling scrapbooks. She lobbied the aviation industry to provide more accurate records and passenger manifests. But despite her busyness, a hole remained in her heart. “As a consequence of terrorism, I was no longer a mother,” she said. “I wanted to regain my status as a mother. Terrorism wasn’t going to have another victim in me. On Christopher’s birthday, in March 1990, we decided we wanted to adopt a child.”

Because most U.S. orphanages considered the Nuccis too old (at the time, Georgia was forty-seven and Tony forty-nine), they investigated foreign adoption and learned that up to 40,000 children are abandoned every day around the world. When they saw a picture of four siblings from Colombia, ages

two to ten, who had been abandoned by their mother because she could no longer care for them, their hearts told them what they had to do. They brought the children home, struggled through all the necessary adjustments, and began the serious work of creating a family.

“I suppose I could have sat in the corner and sucked my thumb for eternity,” Georgia said. But she didn’t. After the children had adjusted to their new home, Georgia enrolled in law school, at age fifty-one. Today she is a staff attorney for the New York Department of Taxation and Finance. “My life,” she said, “is fuller than it’s ever been.”<sup>1</sup>

Her flashpoint, born of grief, brought love and hope back into the lives of four children—and untold numbers of people who will benefit from her efforts to heal the grief caused by terrorism.

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## HAVE YOU FELT THE INNER SPARK?

Gerald Ford, Mikhail Gorbachev, Princess Diana, Mother Teresa, Rosa Parks, Georgia Nucci. In their own way, each of these people came to a flashpoint and made a courageous decision, one that impacted many lives beyond their own. Has your life been transformed by a flashpoint experience? Did it follow a frustrating struggle to succeed or a failure to conquer? Did it come in the aftershocks of tragedy, the loss of someone you loved, or the destruction of something you valued? Perhaps you reached your flashpoint after achieving a pinnacle of success, only to find it unfulfilling. Or maybe it was a startling moment of insight when you caught a glimpse of how life could be if only you would choose to live differently.

Some people never reach their flashpoint. Instead, they

soldier on, living what Henry David Thoreau called “lives of quiet desperation,” filled with regrets and dead dreams. Undoubtedly you know men and women who willingly “stay the course” through loneliness, despair, and self-destruction. They persist in old patterns and habits because they believe life can’t get any better and that everyone suffers to some degree without hope. The leg irons of predictability and routine bind them to their desperate lifestyle.

This book is about unshackling ourselves from the past and stepping out of our self-imposed prisons. It’s about trading our mundane existence for exuberant life; exchanging the predictable routine for amazing feats, thrills, surprises, and delights. When we surrender our hopelessness and grasp onto new opportunities, we’ll discover a new way to live, awaken our dormant talents, and inspire others by our shining example.

Do you believe it? Do you have a dream you’re afraid to follow? Perhaps life has dropped you into a difficult situation you didn’t choose. Perhaps you are tired of living in quiet desperation and long for the freedom to break out. Perhaps you yearn to get your high school diploma, lose fifty pounds, or find the courage to escape an abusive situation. I don’t know what you’re facing, but I do know that you can come to a flashpoint and make a decision about finding or making a better life. You can follow in the footsteps of those who have transformed their lives and changed the world for all of us.

Dreamers can be found in every bed, but the adventurers are those who wake up and refuse to leave their dreams behind. When we muster the courage to act on our dreams, the ensuing flashpoints will lead to new opportunities for

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ourselves, our loved ones, our friends and neighbors—and sometimes for the entire world.

If you've been slumbering beneath the covers, filled with what-ifs and why-nots, perhaps it is time to stop dreaming and wake up to the possibilities that flood your life. Get up. Get out into the world and make a difference. Today is a great day for positive change!

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### MY FLASHPOINT

I have experienced several flashpoints in my life (yes, you can have more than one!), but let me tell you about the one making the most difference in my life today.

In 1995, with my eyes and heart open to new ideas, I attended my first Peter Lowe Success Seminar. The event, held in the Anaheim Pond, featured great speakers like Zig Ziglar, Robert Schuller, Larry King, and a host of others. The mood was exciting, the atmosphere intense, and even though today I can't recall a single specific quote from any of the speakers, they had a tremendous impact. Something that day, whatever it was, touched a place that had been stirring within me for years. As the speakers interacted with the crowd, I began to observe the audience. The Anaheim arena has about 18,000 seats, and on this particular day 7,000 people had taken time from work to come hear these motivational speakers.

Then it happened. In an instant my mind filled with a dazzling idea, a vision that still amazes me to this day. I looked around and said to myself, *No one has ever brought the finest Christian female communicators together in one place like this. If I could coordinate that kind of event, we could fill every seat, not neces-*

*sarily to motivate women for “success,” but simply to encourage them. I believe they need it—and they deserve it.*

I returned to my office the next day and called Barbara Johnson, a woman I had met years before. She happens to be the best-selling Christian female author of all time, with books like *Where Does a Mother Go to Resign?* and *Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy*. If calling her sounds like a big step (and it was!), remember that a flashpoint brings with it the inspiration and motivation to take action. When Barbara answered the phone, I told her my idea and asked if she would like to be a part of it. Amazingly, she said yes.

Emboldened, I then called Patsy Clairmont, another best-selling Christian author, whom I had met at a dinner given by the publishing division of Focus on the Family. At the dinner, while everyone clamored for Dr. Dobson’s attention, I noticed a small woman sitting with her husband over in the corner. Thinking they might want some company, I walked over to visit. Only later did I discover that Patsy was the keynote speaker for the evening! When her turn came, she stood on a chair (she’s tiny!) and soon had that crowd wrapped around her little finger.

Patsy and I had spoken several times since that night, and when I called to discuss the possibility of a women’s conference, she said she’d sign on if I persevered. These commitments from two hugely successful authors proved to be the defining answers to my plan. I went on to contact Marilyn Meberg and Luci Swindoll, and soon we had formed a team. We cleared the dates for six events in 1996 and began to promote them.

We held the first conference at a church in southern

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California. Before the first speaker stepped to the podium, all 2,300 seats were filled. An additional three hundred women watched on live television in an overflow room. The great response of the women to the speakers led to many changed lives. I knew we were on to something, so we began to expand the vision.

During the first year, 30,000 women attended our events. We hosted 150,000 the second year. The third year's conference attracted 300,000 women, and now we average more than 300,000 each year. Our vision has become known as Women of Faith, and it is the largest conference event in America, visiting nearly thirty cities a year with a message of encouragement and hope for women. Women of Faith, which began as a tiny flashpoint, became a pinnacle in my life.

What makes the success of Women of Faith even more amazing to me is the failure that preceded it. The year before I attended the Peter Lowe conference, I had coordinated a twelve-city tour called "Winning at Work Without Losing at Love" with myself as the featured speaker. The total turnout for that less-than-stellar event—adding up the audience from all twelve cities—was just over one thousand people. In Chicago, we drew a grand total of thirty-six attendees, at least ten of whom came from clinics I operated in the area. I felt like one big loser going around talking about winning.

But even though the star attraction—yours truly—failed to attract much attention, that speaking tour wasn't a total loss. Through it I learned how to produce and promote a traveling seminar. As humbling as it was at the time, I can see now how God used that experience as a training ground for Women of Faith. In 1997, we held a Women of Faith conference at the

Anaheim Pond, the same place where I had experienced my flashpoint. This time, every single seat was filled.

I am often asked why I think God chose me, a man, to begin Women of Faith. I don't fully know the answer to that question, but I do know that God can put the pieces of our life together like a jigsaw puzzle—the good, the bad, and the ugly—to make a beautiful picture. In my case, for years I had seen women as objects and treated them disdainfully. Over time, as God touched and healed some deep wounds in my life, my view of women began to change. Out of that healing came a desire to give something back to women, to atone for what I had taken. My flashpoint moment may have occurred in 1995, but my desire to minister to women had come as a revelation years earlier. Since the beginning of Women of Faith, sparks from that single flashpoint have resulted in the burning embers of grace, love, and joy igniting salvation in the hearts of more than 1.5 million women.

I have to be honest. I've made some big mistakes in my life. But I've learned that it's never too late to change. It's never too late to find the life you desire. All it takes is one flashpoint and one decision to fire your passions and move you toward your dreams.

*“But I don't have time to change! I barely have time to read this book!”*

I hear that cry. If your life is full of rushing from one thing to another, it's time to stop and take stock of the situation. Friend, you don't have time to continue living in a mad rush. What is life, if not the investment of time? Mark this: If you are not spending your days and hours in a way that satisfies and

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thrills your soul, it's time for some internal combustion. Let your dreams, desires, and passions build to a flashpoint and set your soul on fire. Decide right now to live differently from this moment forward.

If you're ready to read the next page, you're ready for a flashpoint. My task is to show you how simple it can be to change from merely existing to living a passionate life. Sound far-fetched? As Walt Disney used to say, "It's kind of fun to do the impossible!"<sup>2</sup>