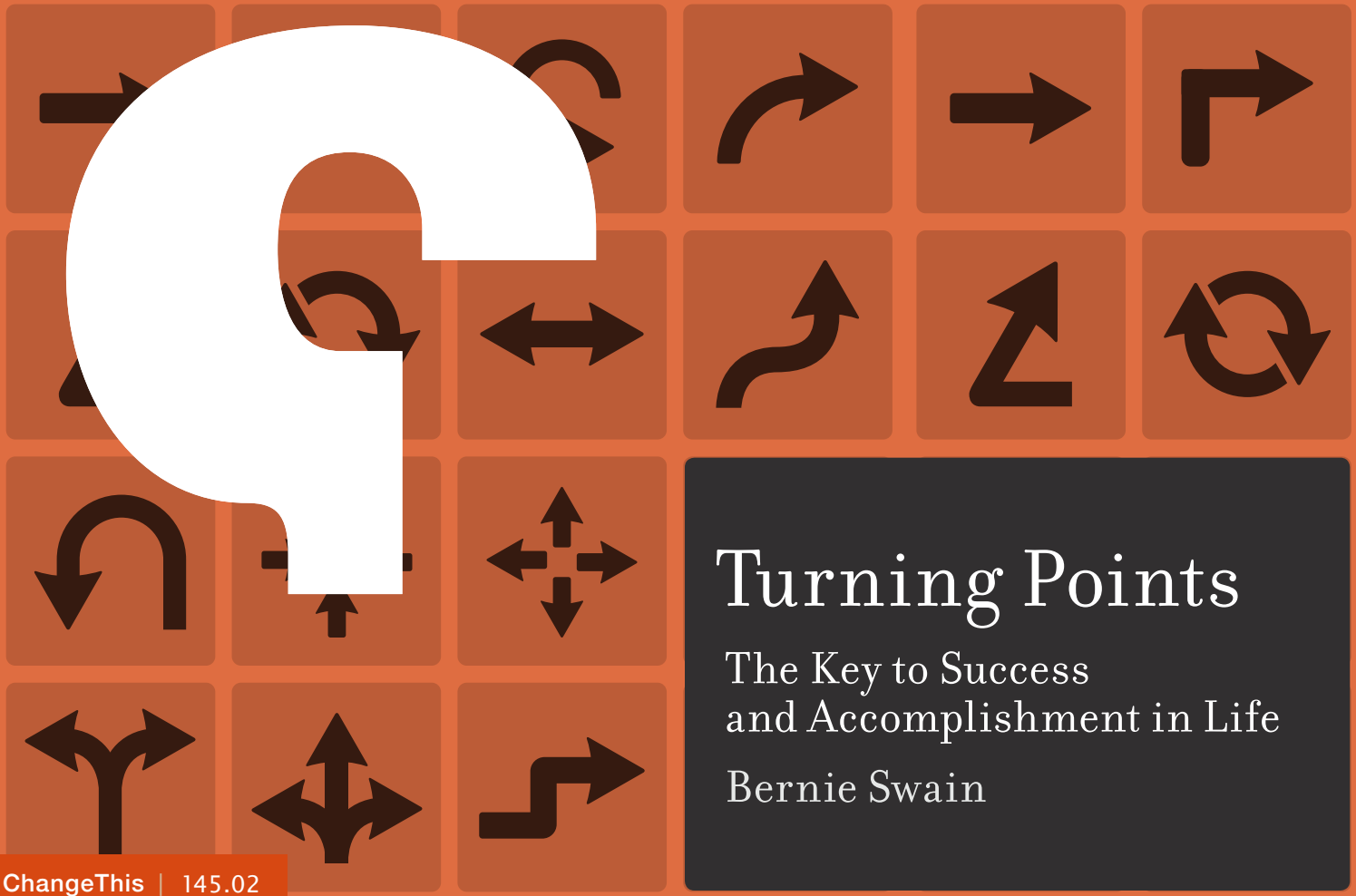

# Turning Points

## The Key to Success and Accomplishment in Life

Bernie Swain

ChangeThis | 145.02

# Sometimes you know it right away. Sometimes you recognize it years later. Sometimes you miss its significance entirely until someone else connects the dots.

It's the turning point in your life—a subtle or stark shift set in motion by a person, event, or epiphany that has sent you down a different path and in the process has transformed what you were into what you have now become.

Maybe the person was your third-grade teacher or your football coach, or your wife or husband. The event could have been a family tragedy, a loss of a job, or a painful insult. And the epiphany—well, in my case, it was facing the simple fact, once my wife opened my eyes to it, that I didn't want to work for someone else.

That revelation led me to turn my back on a 15-year quest to become a college athletic director and to enter a field in which I had no experience at all, the lecture business. It was a pretty bold, some would say reckless, move to make, given that we had no savings and a one-year-old child. But in less than a decade, the company I co-founded and built, the Washington Speakers Bureau, became the world's biggest player in that business—and remains so now, more than 30 years after I took the sharp turn that reshaped my life.

We have represented world leaders—including Presidents Reagan and both Bushes and four Prime Ministers of Great Britain—as well as business visionaries, sports legends, and leading journalists and authors.

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Over the course of the years, I have gotten close to many of my clients. And yes, they are a spectacularly accomplished group. But the secret sauce that is responsible for so much of their success isn't their talent per se. Instead, it is how they have dealt with the key turning points in their lives.

Maybe a better way of putting it is how they managed to define those turning points—seeing inspiration and motivation in both the deep disappointments and the unexpected opportunities that came their way, and then committing whole-heartedly to a new path forward. That commitment allowed them to tap into their potential and to uncover their passion—to fulfill their childhood dreams or to fashion new ones. And the strength of that commitment became the yardstick of their success, allowing them to capitalize on each achievement by using it as the foundation for the next.

To be sure, very few of us can become President of the United States or reach the stature of a Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Tom Brokaw, Ben Carson, or Terry Bradshaw, just some of my clients who shared their life stories with me. But all of us have a say, consciously or—too often—unconsciously, in where we go and how far we get.

# ‘For the First Time, I Took a Good Look at the World Around Me’

What defined former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, at first, was his height. “I am four feet eleven and have always been short,” said Reich. Starting in kindergarten, he was teased and bullied, and he learned to find someone bigger who could act as a protector. One of those who watched out for him was an older kid named Michael Schwerner.

Years later, in 1964, Mickey Schwerner and two other young civil rights workers were brutally murdered in Neshoba County, Mississippi, by the Ku Klux Klan—a crime that shocked the country, and horrified Reich, who had just graduated from high school.

Until then, Reich had been on the sidelines, indifferent to the civil rights movement and the other great issues of the day. But the “injustice and sheer savagery” of Schwerner’s death “dramatically changed my life,” Reich recalled. “For the first time, I took a good look at the world around me.”

That look galvanized Reich, who became deeply involved in civil rights, protests against Vietnam, and campus politics at Dartmouth. Before he graduated, he worked for Senator Robert Kennedy and on Gene McCarthy’s presidential campaign in 1968.

When Martin Luther King Jr. and then Kennedy were assassinated that year, “my commitment to public service took firm hold.” That fall, he headed to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, becoming fast friends on the boat to England with another Rhodes winner, Bill Clinton. Twenty-five years later, President Clinton named Reich as his first Labor Secretary, a post he never would have aspired to without Mickey Schwerner.

“When I was a vulnerable child, Mickey protected me from harm,” said Reich, now a prolific writer on social and economic issues and a professor at Berkeley. “I, in turn, feel a responsibility to protect others.”

## Taking the Right Fork in the Road

Reich’s decision to follow in Mickey Schwerner’s footsteps wasn’t a given. He could have seen Schwerner’s death as a cautionary tale—and dug in his heels to remain safe on the sidelines. That he chose to follow, and not dig in, spoke volumes about who Reich already was at that critical moment.

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it," Yogi Berra famously said. Just how we take it determines not only where we are going but who we will become.

One way or another, these forks in the road, our turning points, define us. They begin early in life with our childhood experiences, our relationship with our parents, the ideas and concepts we wrestle with as young adults, and our struggles moving away from home. They include the people who enter and leave our lives, a new job, getting married, having children, and changing careers. These are turning points that we set in motion by our own actions. Others are unexpected and often unforeseen. We suffer from injury or illness, the death of a friend or member of our family. We experience adversity, failure, misfortune, and crisis.

Every turning point presents us with a question and requires a decision. In deciding which fork in the road to take, we weigh options and consider the positive and negative outcomes.

To make good decisions, however, we must be able to make good choices. This is the moral part of turning points, and what best characterizes successful people. Is this the right thing to do? What will be the effect of my decision? What will my decision look like years from now?

## What Successful People Can Teach Us

In my years working with some of the most diverse, interesting, and accomplished people in the world, I've learned a few things about the transformative power of turning points:

- ➔ We are all guided and defined by the important influences and moments in our lives. These don't just change us—they can also educate us. If we are ready to learn from them, they can make us stronger and wiser, and contribute greatly to our character and accomplishment.

- ➔ All of us are subject to one turning point that can affect us more than the others. It is a turning point that is intimately personal and, for that reason, hard to predict. That turning point can dramatically change the trajectory and direction of our life.

- ➔ A fortunate number of people recognize this critical turning point, embrace it, and are able to draw from it. It can produce the passion needed to succeed at almost anything.

I learned something else as well: that the preconceived notions about famous and successful people are largely wrong. In most cases, they don't become famous and successful because of luck, money, or family connections. In a surprising number of cases, talent doesn't get them there, either.

Most of them started from humble beginnings and their lives changed because of that one personal, strong influence or defining moment.

Why does this one turning point have a greater effect on us than the others? Maybe it happens at just the right time. Maybe it touches something inside us or has a moral component to it. Maybe it is the last piece of the puzzle that has been building in our life for years. But whatever triggers it, it shines a bright light, and successful and accomplished people have found the switch.

What that says, though, is that some measure of success and accomplishment is possible for everyone, no matter where they come from and what obstacles are in their way, if only they can find that switch. I am proof of that, and so are the speakers I represent.

> *“We are all guided and defined by the important influences and moments in our lives. These don’t just change us—they can also educate us.*

# Two Parents, Five Children, and One Tiny Bathroom

Consider the path that took George Mitchell from a hardscrabble childhood to the heights of politics, business, and international diplomacy.

Mitchell was born during the Depression, in 1933, in Waterville, Maine, a town of textile mills. His parents were largely uneducated. His father, born in Boston, worked for a utility company; when his division was shut down, he became a janitor. Mitchell's mother, an immigrant from Lebanon who could neither read nor write English, worked the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift at one of the mills throughout the years that the couple raised their five children. When Mitchell was six, the family finally had enough money to move a few hundred yards from the vile-smelling Kennebec River, then heavily polluted from the mills. He still remembers his father's pride in their new house, so small that the seven-member family had to share a single tiny bathroom.

All of the kids worked as soon as they could. Mitchell started when he was five, delivering papers, shoveling snow, mowing lawns, and later becoming a janitor himself. "We were always well fed and made do with hand-me-down clothes," he recalls. "I never felt any stigma because half the town was in the same situation."

When it came time for college, Mitchell's three older brothers (he also had a younger sister) all won athletic scholarships. But Mitchell had limited sports ability and no money for school. He was on the verge of going to work at the local paper mill when his father's former supervisor at the utility company asked to see him. The supervisor had set up an interview for Mitchell at his alma mater, Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine.

The director of admissions there was blunt about George's financial plight. "If you are willing to work, we'll find some work for you."

He was definitely willing to work—at a heating oil and building materials company and a host of jobs at the school. Whatever it took. "The bedrock of my life, the foundation I've returned to again and again," he says, "has been the work ethic and undaunted spirit of my family."

After graduating from Bowdoin, he served in the military and went on to law school. And, in time, he became a prosecutor, a federal judge, the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, the chairman of the Walt Disney Company, and the U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland, where he helped fashion the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which formally ended the 30 years of disturbances known as the Troubles.

"It never would have happened," he says, "without the mentorship" of the utility supervisor, the admissions director, and Bowdoin's athletic director (who found him some of those jobs). "They reached out and took a chance on me."

And once he got that chance, he ran for his life.

## A Legacy of Books

For Condoleezza Rice, the switch had been found nearly a century before she was born by her paternal great-grandmother, Julia Head, a slave on an Alabama cotton plantation until the end of the Civil War, when she was freed at the age of thirteen. Rice's challenge was to recognize and embrace the great gift Julia Head had sent down through the years to her descendants: a love of reading—Julia learned to read while still on the plantation—and a commitment to learning.

In 1892, Rice's grandfather, John Wesley Rice, was born to Julia and her sharecropper husband. "He was a bright, curious child, and Julia taught him to read at an early age," the former Secretary of State recounts. "Growing up, he loved learning and was determined to go to college."

After graduating from Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, John Wesley Rice became a Presbyterian minister who went on with his wife to found several schools and churches in the South.

"The Rice family was dedicated to education," Rice says, citing her father's recollection of the day during the Depression when John Wesley "came home with nine leather-bound, gold-embossed books"—the works of Shakespeare, Hugo, and others. The books cost $90, "a huge sum at the time," and Rice's grandmother told John Wesley to return them, even though he was paying them out over time.

John Wesley won that argument. "My grandfather believed in having books in the home, and, more importantly, he believed in having his children read them." He won that argument, too—Rice's father earned two master's degrees and her Aunt Theresa got a PhD in Victorian literature.

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In 1981, Rice received *her* PhD, in political science. The degree—and the hard work, commitment, and sacrifice that it took to both earn and use it—made it possible for Condi Rice to succeed on a path that few women, let alone a black woman, have traveled. In her academic career, she served as Provost of Stanford University; in government service, she was President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor before being named Secretary of State.

When she received her PhD, her father gave her the five remaining books from her grandfather's set. They sit now on her mantelpiece.

"My grandfather died just before I was born, but he has inspired me all my life. Whenever I look at those books, I feel his legacy," she says. "That's when I am reminded that I was lifted on some very strong shoulders."

## Staying the Course

Turning points only count to the extent that we make something of them. Robert Reich could have kept to the sidelines. George Mitchell could have found college too hard and dropped out. Condi Rice, who is also an accomplished pianist, could have followed any number of fulfilling

paths—and missed her place in history. And I could have said to myself, as I was about to quit my job and leap into the unknowns of the lecture business, "Are you crazy?"

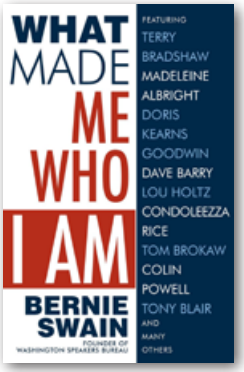
But then the real work begins. Having made the right decision, based on the right choices, you have to stay the course, relying as Mitchell and the others did on a deeply held work ethic and an indomitable spirit. You have to work really hard, even when things don't look all that good.

So here's the final lesson that I learned: Ordinary people achieve extraordinary things when they persevere. This is an important message for anyone starting out in life, or aspiring to do something great at any age. It is the sustained drive to succeed that counts, more than talent.

That doesn't mean that all of us will wind up with great wealth and fame. That's just not the path that most of us are on.

The right path, the right fork in the road, is the one that takes us to our own unique destination, defined by its particular measures of success and accomplishment. **And when we get there, we'll know how extraordinary a journey we have had.**

# Info

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Washington DC-based Bernie Swain is co-founder of the Washington Speakers Bureau and today's foremost authority on the lecture industry. Over the past 35 years, Swain has represented former US Presidents, cabinet members, business executives, public figures, media leaders, and sports legends. For more, visit BernieSwain.com.

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