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# WINNING THE BATTLE OF THE MIND DEFEATING THE GIANT OF TOXIC THINKING

*I found that most people fail in life not because they aim too high and miss. Most people fail in life because they aim too low and hit. And the majority of people don't aim at all.*

Les Brown

Les Brown was born along with his twin brother on the floor of an abandoned building in a poor section of Miami, Florida, called Liberty City. At six-weeks-old, they were adopted by Mrs. Mamie Brown, a single black domestic worker. This woman had no more than a third-grade education, but she possessed a “PhD” in motherhood. Unable to have any children of her own, she ultimately adopted seven abandoned children, believing that somehow God would make

a way for her to provide for them.

As Les grew up, his mother worked for the wealthy residents in Miami Beach, and she often took the children along and gave them chores to do. The first time she took Leslie into one of those beautiful mansions, he stared in amazement.

“Mama, why don’t we live in a house like this?” he asked.

“Son, we can’t afford to,” she explained.

Les and his siblings often wore hand-me-down clothes from the families his mother worked for. If they were too long, his mom would hem them. If they were too short, she would let them out. They also often ate the leftover food from the meals she would cook in the rich people’s homes.

Leslie often accompanied his mother to work and help with the cleaning chores at the house of one wealthy family. While there, he would find an excuse to slip into the owner’s office, where he would pretend to empty the ashtray or dust the books. There he lingered while the owner listened to recorded messages by the writer and speaker Earl Nightingale. Young Les listened as Nightingale explained that we become what we focus our minds on. “You have greatness in you!” he would hear Earl Nightingale declare. As Les kept hearing these words, they began to affect how he thought and how he saw himself. His vision of himself and what God could do with and through him began to expand. Nightingale’s messages brought him to a new level of awareness that what he could do in life was greater than what he was experiencing at that time.

One day, after one of his cleaning and listening sessions in the owner’s office, Les declared, “Mama! When I’m a man, I’m going to buy you a home *just like this!*”

“You don’t have to buy me a home,” she replied, wondering how

this idea had even entered her son's mind.

“I know I don't have to. But I *want* to!”

There it was – the initial dream that Les Brown would pursue for the next two decades of his life. Later, he would embrace the idea of helping people all over the world discover the greatness God had placed within them. But the dream journey began with his mother. She had adopted him and given everything to take care of him, and thus as a young boy he decided that one day he was going to take care of her.

## THE BATTLE OF THE MIND

There was just one problem. He didn't have the natural capacity to make the kind of money needed to buy his mother a mansion like the ones he had seen. Besides being born into poverty, he didn't see how he could climb that ladder of success through education, because he had been labeled as *Educable Mentally Retarded* (EMR). He failed third grade twice. Then, when he was in the eighth grade, he had to go back to grade seven. He was called the “DT” – the *dumb twin*. His brother Wesley was the smart one.

Every time Les was in the rich man's office listening to messages about the untapped potential and greatness within him, his heart would respond to the truth spoken over him. Deep inside, he believed that God had a greater destiny for him than what he was experiencing at that time, but as soon as he walked out the door, his mind would take over and question his ability to do what he held in his heart. “And how do you think you are going to accomplish your dream, Les? How?” Listening to this negative internal dialogue that had been programmed into him, he became discouraged.

Today, Les Brown has a powerful message of hope, along with the ability to create a collective shift in thinking in any audience he speaks to. He has spoken to large corporations, organizations, and churches, as well as youth groups and prisoners all over the world. He's even served as a state legislator in Ohio. People love his personality and his authenticity - and most of all his laughter. He has the gift of enabling his audience to discover the truth of who they are, and helping them believe that their lives can be changed and transformed.

Now, when he gets up to share this message, it is easy for him to do so. But the most difficult hurdle for Les to overcome – and it took him years to do so – was to believe that he was capable of doing what he does today, that he could be a messenger of hope, inspiration, and change. For a long time, he did not believe it, and he silenced himself for more than fourteen years before he began pursuing his dream and rose above his circumstances.

The negative internal voices were a major obstacle that Les had to overcome in the early stages of walking out more of his potential and dream. This is also true for many, if not most, of us. Looking back, Les can see that his negative mindset kept him in bondage and did not allow the person we can see today to show up. He had to go through a major paradigm shift to get rid of the toxic thoughts about himself and his circumstances. The book of Romans gives this admonition on the subject: “Be not conformed to the image of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”<sup>10</sup> This frequently-used Scripture describes the first process Les had to go through. He knew that he was living an average life, but deep inside he had the potential to do more, to experience more, and to have a greater impact. The dream was knocking on the door of his heart

every day, but his mind and fears silenced it for more than a decade.

Of course, the question at hand is how he managed to do it. How did Les Brown renew his mind and change his way of thinking? How did he break the negative messages that had been programmed into his subconscious mind and were inhibiting the progress of pursuing his dreams and true potential? Here is the answer we may not like to hear: to disrupt all that negative internal self-talk, it took a prolonged period of deliberate daily effort to fill his mind with the truth about himself.

## UNCOVERING GREATNESS

When speaking to large audiences about stepping into their destiny, Les Brown often shares a story of one event during his adolescence that impacted him greatly. One day at school, Les was waiting in a classroom for his brother Wesley to arrive when the teacher, Mr. Leroy Washington, called him to the front and said, “Go solve this problem for me.”

“Sir,” Les stuttered, “I can’t do that, sir.”

“Why not?” Mr. Washington wanted to know.

“I’m not one of your students, sir.”

“Go to the board and work the problem out anyhow,” he replied.

“Oh, I can’t do that, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am *educable mentally retarded*. I’m in special education.”

At this point, the other students started laughing and yelling, “That’s Leslie! He’s not Wesley! He’s the *DT*! Wesley is the smart twin!”

Mr. Washington asked, “What does *DT* mean?”

“I’m the *dumb twin*, sir,” Les admitted ruefully. As the rest of the students burst out in laughter, Mr. Washington stood up from behind his desk, walked over to stand in front of Les, looked deep into his eyes, and said with a stern voice: “Don’t you ever say that again! ***Someone else’s opinion of you does not have to become your reality!***”

Mr. Washington’s words created a major interruption in the story that Les had believed to be true about himself. This was a very significant encounter, but it took more than just one instant to bring about a sustained change in his thinking. For Les, the long process of breaking through the negative voices in his life and developing the belief that he could become what he is today was, as described in Psalm 86:4, a valley of weeping, but he made it a spring of hope.

During his journey toward his dream, Les dealt not only with his own negative self-talk, but also with negative input from other people. When he announced that he was going to be a speaker, training people in organizations and corporations, his brother questioned him with an edge of cynicism in his voice:

“Les, do you have a college degree?”

“No, I don’t,” he replied.

“Les, do these people have PhDs and college degrees?”

“Yes, they do.”

“Then how are you, Les Brown, going to train *them* and speak to *them*? How?!”

This process of renewing the mind, as the book of Romans describes it, concerns not only the cognitive level, but also the heart and emotional level. The whole inner man needs to be transformed. The word “mind” in this Scripture passage is not the optimal translation for the concept it expresses. The Hebrew understanding includes

the heart, the emotions, the will, and the core of our being. Other Scriptures likewise refer to the *thoughts of the heart*.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, neuroscientists have found that the heart has its own brain and is deeply connected to our thought processes.<sup>12</sup> And the thoughts that originate in the heart are particularly strong. Often, in the case of past experiences of brokenness and trauma, renewing the mind requires deep inner emotional healing before a change of mindset. Chapter Seven will offer more insight into that process.

The change of our thought patterns is an integral part of the refining process on our way to fulfill our dreams and destiny. Nineteenth-century author Wallace D. Wattles points this out as the first, but most difficult step: “To think according to appearances is easy. To think truth regardless of appearances is laborious and requires the expenditure of more power than any other workman is called upon to perform.”<sup>13</sup> He adds that there is no other work that people avoid more than that of sustained thoughts of truth.

## WHEN LIFE DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

Today, to continue to combat the negative internal voices about his lack of ability, Les practices a regimen of daily routines to feed his mind with positive input. For him, it is starting his day with listening to uplifting messages for at least half an hour, praying, meditating on the truth of Scripture, and speaking it over his life. Next to that, he reads at least 40 pages of something positive and inspiring every day, and he shuts out any negative influences, whether from the news, from strangers, or from “friends.”

As for most people, this has been an extremely challenging process for Les Brown, but it has yielded great results. More than

anything else, it prepared him to stand firm in the midst of the most painful season in his life, which he faced years later.

At the time, Les was running an awareness campaign to encourage men to have a prostate exam. The director of the campaign asked him if he had ever had an examination himself. When Les said he hadn't, the director challenged him to do so. Les took it to heart and soon visited his doctor. Three days after his examination, he received a phone call from the doctor's office.

"Can you come in? We need to talk," the doctor said.

"No, I can't. What is it?" Les replied, noticing the difference in the doctor's voice.

"You have prostate cancer."

Although this unexpected news came as quite a blow, it didn't throw Les off course. He took it on as a project, like picking a battle, and he was determined to win. It was actually another doctor's report about his mother that he received shortly after his own diagnosis that made him crumble. He was told that she had breast cancer, which had metastasized to the liver and other organs, and the doctors only gave her a few months to live. "I still remember the day we received the doctor's report. I was with her to support her – but when the doctor broke the news, I broke down crying. I thought I was the strong one, but I wasn't prepared for that," Les shared in our interview. "In the end, it was my mother and sister who supported me when we were walking out of the doctor's office."

One reason why this hit Les so hard was the special relationship he had with his mother. He says, "They always called me Mamie's boy, because even though I'm not her biological son, I have the same personality she did." Les' mother was always very uplifting, positive, fun-loving, and full of faith. "No matter what I was going through,

she would always instill the faith in me that everything was going to turn out alright,” Les explains. She was his hero. So, upon receiving the news of her diagnosis, Les resigned from his office as a state representative and joined his siblings in taking care of his mother.

Seeing his mother’s health deteriorate to the point that she was fully incapacitated was one of Les’ most difficult personal struggles. “She had been such a strong force in my life. She was a rock who had always been there for me,” Les shares. “To be there, seeing her suffer and watching her take her last breath was such a painful experience.” He can still vividly recall sitting beside her bed and holding her lifeless hand, thinking about what kind of woman this was who had decided to take in children that weren’t hers and to give her life to them. “She was a mystery to me, and I loved her and admired her. To process her suffering and death was the toughest challenge I have encountered in my life.”

This was also the time of a fierce battle of emotions within Les. Anger rose within him, because he was not able to stop her suffering. “I was angry with God that she had to go out that way, that she was in so much pain. And I was angry that there was nothing I could do to stop it. After a certain amount of medication, the doctors won’t give any more pain medication, even if the patient is in pain. It was a painful death, and I couldn’t stop it. I remember praying to God, asking him, ‘Give it to me, I’m strong. I can beat it, but don’t let my mother suffer.’” But he couldn’t cut the deal.

The morning after his mother passed away, an article in the newspaper triggered a torrent of pain and anger in him. It reported that a mafia leader, who had been responsible for a large number of mob executions, had died comfortably in his sleep at 92 years of age in Miami. “At that moment, I became very angry,” Les recalls.

“This man had caused so much harm and suffering, but he had died comfortably in his sleep at 92, but my mother suffered terrible pain when she took her last breath.”

What helped Les to process the loss of his mother and deal with the anger and emotional turmoil? “It was the example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who said, ‘*My God is able to deliver us from your hands, but even if he doesn’t, we still won’t bow,*’”<sup>14</sup> Les says. “I had to come to a place where I said, ‘God, I know you’re able to deliver her from this experience, but if you don’t deliver her from this pain, if you don’t bring her out of this experience, I still will not bow to anger, to depression or to despair,’” he explains. “I decided instead to focus on the years that God had blessed me with her life, with her love and with her presence.”

## BELIEVING AGAINST OUTWARD APPEARANCES

Through this and other experiences, Les has established a rule that he follows in dealing with life’s difficult seasons: he guards his heart and refuses to allow it to become bitter. “Sooner or later we all encounter ordeals in life that do not make sense,” Les shares. “Sometimes life does not happen the way we want it to happen, even with all of our prayers, with our tithing and all the good things that we do.” But it is in this place of pain and suffering that the testing comes, and we must conquer the enemy inside. Les has built a foundation he stands on when storms hit. “I know that whatever I’m going through can make me bitter, or it can make me better,” he says. “*In life, you will always be faced with this series of God-ordained opportunities brilliantly disguised as problems and challenges - and when the very foundation of your life has been shaken, you run to God, only to discover that it is*

*God that is doing this shaking.*” Les emphasizes that we must know that God is there even if we are going through pain, and even if the situation is the opposite of what we think it should be. “I believe that God is in the midst of it, and that it is going to turn out alright. We must not judge according to outward appearances.”

When we experience suffering and pain, our hearts are always challenged. For Les, dealing with disappointments and contradictions starts with a decision to trust God and to deliberately focus on his thought processes. Les says that in everything he is facing, he reminds himself that there is a way through. “I don’t need to understand everything or make sense of it, what I need to do is to be grounded within myself and to know that my God is able to bring me through, that I am not dealing with this by myself. I need to remind myself that God is with me, even though I’ve made some requests that have not been answered.” After going through the experience of losing his mother, the focus of his prayers shifted. He no longer asks God to change circumstances, but instead instead he asks for strength to cope and come out on the other side still believing, still loving, still trusting.

Not only did this critical experience change his relationship with God and his outlook on life; it also launched Les into his ultimate assignment, which changed people’s lives all over the world. “I decided that I was going to become more committed to making a difference, because even though my mother only had a third-grade education, she made a difference in so many people’s lives,” Les shares. “A reporter once asked my mother what made her decide to adopt children. She said she wanted to share her life and make a difference. So she decided that she was going to make a difference in other people’s lives - like she made a difference in mine. She put

her stamp on me. She had a passion for love. She had a great sense of humor, and she loved and embraced people, and I wanted to live my life like that. I wanted to be the kind of person that would touch people in a special way as she touched me, to love people and to help them see the possibilities of living their life to the fullest.”

## DESTINED TO WIN

This is what Les Brown is doing to this day: impacting people’s lives, encouraging them to follow their dreams, bringing change to the way they see themselves and pointing them to the greatness they carry inside of them. One reason why he is so powerful in impacting people’s lives is that he, the messenger, lives and embodies the message he teaches.

He lived this out in his battle with cancer. Every day for over nineteen years after his diagnosis, he fought cancer, speaking Scriptures and healing over himself. Every day, he would say: “God, I give thanks that I am healed, that my immune system is strong and produces white blood cells, and will kill every renegade cancer cell in my body! I declare that every day and in every way I’m getting better and better.” He did this for *nineteen years* and he did not slack one single day. “I could not afford to!” Les emphasizes.

Then, in 2013, Les received the doctor’s report that his cancer had metastasized into his bones. He soon needed to wear pain patches, because the cancer had eaten up 40 percent of his T1 vertebrae. He also had to wear a corset to support his spine. In spite of all that, he continued thanking God for healing, and publicly declaring onstage that he was determined to win the battle and not bow to cancer.

He backs up his approach on an article by Harvard medical

researcher Dr. Borysenko, who stated that no disease is incurable. According to Borysenko, all diseases can be cured, but most people are not willing to do the work. This work involves creating new neural pathways in your brain and speaking to your body on the cellular level. Les concurs: “Life and death are in the power of the tongue,<sup>15</sup> and so often we speak death before we speak life.” He continues, “You have to be in alignment with your thoughts, your vision, your words, your feelings and your actions. You have to believe that it is done.”

## SEEING BEYOND CANCER

When Les read the article, he determined to do the work. He decided that he would do whatever it took. “I saw myself beyond cancer. That’s the capacity of imagination. God said to Abraham ‘I’ll give you all your eyes can see.’<sup>16</sup> The doctors determine the diagnosis, but God determines the prognosis – and that prognosis needs to become your reality. I had to see myself beyond cancer,” Les affirms. He wants to see his great-grandchildren grow up. “Thirty years from now I will be here to go to my great-grandson’s graduation. That is my mindset, and I work on that.”

And so it was that one day, after nineteen years of speaking against the pain and declaring that he would not bow to it, Les felt his pain subside. This was in 2014. And a CT scan done shortly afterward left his doctors amazed. “We don’t know what happened or what you did. But you can go and live your life. You are free of cancer,” they said.

“I know God spared my life for the greater purpose and assignment to help people discover the greatness in them, to raise up voices of hope in the world that impact their nations and become agents of

change. And I am committed to that cause,” Les reflects. Working on his mindset took diligence and perseverance, but it helped him stand strong through the ups and downs of life and hold the course in the midst of the storms.

As much as this would be a desirable ending for this chapter, this is not the story’s end. Life often takes unexpected turns, and so it did with Les: in 2016 the storm rose up again when he found out that the cancer had returned, this time more aggressively than before. The diagnosis, however, hasn’t changed his approach to life, his beliefs or his daily practice of working on his mindset. He has his mind fixed on his goal and works every day at keeping it renewed. He continues to declare that he will not judge according to appearances, circumstances, or doctor’s reports – but according to a higher standard: the truth that sets him free.

Les Brown is an outstanding example of someone who has built a strong anchor to remain grounded and weather the storms of life. He is not swayed by circumstances, and even in the midst of his own battles, he always has up words for down times. Whenever he gets on the stage and speaks, his words pierce the souls of his listeners. He holds up his testimony like a mirror, which reflects what is possible for those who believe. His example invites you to embark on the journey of faith, of refusing to bow to circumstances, and of discovering the greatness within you. It’s never too late, and as his example shows... it’s worth the effort!