(Un)Magical Moments: Burning Your Feet from Firewalking

By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 28, 2016

Tony Robbins is a motivational speaker who believes in "magic moments." He encourages guests to walk over a pit of burning coals to show the power of overcoming your fears. Unfortunately, that part of the seminar often isn't as magical as planned.

Last week in Dallas, at one of Robbins' "Unleash the Power Within" seminars, 30 people had to be treated for burns to their feet, five of whom were taken to the hospital. And this isn't the first time that people got burned at one of Robbins' firewalking events. Back in 2012, some attendees received second- and third-degree burns.

To be fair, lots of people have gone firewalking without any problems. So, why do some people walk (or limp) away with blisters? Many believe that it's because they weren't in the proper mindset. It's about mind over matter. Bill Carmody writes:

"Tony Robbins' only intent is to call people to breakthrough [sic] their mind's limitations and become more of themselves... He's a true master of the human psyche."

No. Psychosomatics isn't necessary to explain firewalking. It's not about overcoming mental obstacles or tapping into some mysterious inner force. The explanation is much more mundane: Physics.

Coal, as well as the ash that forms around it, is not a particularly efficient conductor of heat. That's
why you can walk on it -- albeit very briefly -- without getting burned. (People who do get burned probably let their feet remain in contact with the coal for too long a period of time.) Similarly, as the excellent video at the bottom of this post explains, conduction is why you can stick your hands into a hot oven without getting burned (because air isn’t a good conductor), while touching the side of the oven would cause you to scream in pain (because metal is an excellent conductor).

So, remember, if you play with fire, sometimes you get burned.

https://youtu.be/-iBFwpKV6ak [6]