

August 13, 1995

Dear David;

Why do I want to write about Morrie? He's dying. I know it. He knows it. Maybe he has three months left before the disease takes over him over completely, the way it's already taken over his feet, his legs, his hips. Once it hits the lungs, he stops talking, and soon he dies. He knows it. I know it. People die all the time. And yet, there is something about him there, in his chair, in his small office on that quiet street in Newton, looking at me as if he's been waiting for decades, as if he always knew I'd come back...

We were teacher and student at Brandeis University. He had been a sociology professor there for decades, including the turbulent 60's, when Brandeis was a political hotbed, the demonstrations, anti-war marches, Angela Davis, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman. One time Morrie was the go-between for the school and some Black

Panther types. They had taken over a building. Morrie, who never judged people, was standing by the building, watching, when he was asked by one of his students if he wanted to get inside. Morrie said sure. And he crawled in through the window. Nobody said anything. He's a small white-haired guy with a beak nose, crooked teeth and Santa Claus eyes. What were they gonna do? Shoot him?

Anyhow, everyone loved Morrie, and even the Panther types said, "This guy's OK." They ended up giving him their list of demands. He crawled out the window and took them to the university president, without judgment, without force. Morrie was always the guy who saw both sides.

By the time I got to Brandeis, in the mid-70's, the ashes had cooled, and it was just another place for smart kids to train to be doctors, lawyers and businessmen. Maybe when he met me, Morrie saw a little of the 60's spirit revisited. I was pretty rambunctious in college, I wanted to be a musician, I went against type. He took to me. I took to him. I used to call him "Coach" and he liked that. He reminded me of a favorite uncle, only gentler, more astute. He listened to everything. He challenged me to think and to feel. He said not to worry about making money like so many of my fellow students, to become instead "a whole person." He said I shouldn't be afraid to do things like express myself and cry. Being 19 years old, naturally, my immediate reaction was: "This guy is an easy A." I took seven classes with him.

I also wrote my honors thesis under him. It was about how, in America, sports had replaced religion as the opium of the masses. At the time, I had no idea I would eventually become a sportswriter and a sports broadcaster, get rich from it, even become nationally known for it. The thesis was just something I did in college, mostly because Morrie encouraged me. I saw him three times a week, in his office, or under a tree, or in the cafeteria over lunch. He told me about growing up poor in Brooklyn, about working with mental health patients, about how he loved to dance, even by himself, how he wasn't embarrassed to take the floor, close his eyes and spin around. I know he sounds weird. But you have to meet him, he's this little old guy, with a genuine twinkle in his eye.

He was also the biggest slob. He would talk while he ate, telling me stories, gesturing wildly, and the food would spew out of his mouth. I'm not kidding. He went on and on about life - "find yourself...develop your heart" - and all the while these little pieces of egg salad were stuck in his teeth. The whole time I knew him, I had two overwhelming urges: to hug him, and to give him a napkin.

I finished the thesis. I graduated with the highest honors in my department. It was 1979. That was the last piece of sociology I wrote.

It was also the last time I saw Morrie.

Until this year. Morrie is dying of a disease named for - of all things - a baseball player. Lou Gehrig's Disease. ALS. It's the worst. A slow killer with no known cure. I found out through network TV. Morrie was being interviewed by for a second time by Ted Koppel on "Nightline" (the producer said those were two of their most moving programs ever - and they are planning a third.) Koppel was fascinated by Morrie's approach to dying, which was not to shrivel up and feel sorry for himself, but to continue teaching, as he always had taught. Only now he would teach about dying. At one point in the interview, Morrie started to cry. he said to Koppel, "I hope this doesn't embarrass you. Most people don't like to see men cry. I think it's OK for men to cry."

Still the same guy.

When I finally got his number, I called, and a nurse answered. She passed on the name. There was a long pause, and then I heard that high pitched voice. "Hello?"

I said, "Hello, Morrie, this is Mitch Albom, an old student of yours..."

"How come you didn't call me Coach?" he said.

Since then, I have spent a lot of time with Morrie. I plan to continue to do so, sitting by him in his study, or at the kitchen table, until the end comes. I'm not sure why, David, I

find myself drawn to him, his simple way, the wisdom which seems to expand every day that he gets closer to the end.

I am not alone. Since the Nightline programs, Morrie has become a kind of cult celebrity. People write him from around the world. They call, they make pilgrimages. It's as if he's this voice from the deep dark basement that we will all descend into eventually, and he's telling people as he goes down the steps that it's not so bad, that if you live a certain way, you can die a certain way, too.

Most of those people are strangers. He gives them a little time. But when I come to visit, he stops everything, he cancels everything, he clears the decks, he sits in this recliner chair in his office, with a little blanket over his knees, and he smiles and says, "Today, I give to you."

We have found each other again, after 16 years. For me, it's been a much needed reunion. As you know, I have a million things going, I make a lot of money from TV, radio, newspapers, books, even that movie screenplay that we sold. I just got married, and we're thinking about kids. In so many ways my life, for someone in his mid 30's, must seem marvelously lucky, smack in the middle of the big happy road.

And yet, now and then, there is this sense of emptiness. Of purpose. I work a lot. I am not always sure what for. I think a lot of successful people from my generation are hitting this wall right about now, they're burned themselves to a crisp, and the checkbook isn't the source of joy that it used to be.

To make things worse, for me, there has been this terrible newspaper strike in Detroit and suddenly, being out of work for the first time in years, being caught in the middle of a labor war, both sides screaming about money and contracts and fair treatment, I find myself drawn more and more to the simplicity of my old professor. Here is Morrie, looking death in the eye, every morning, he gets up, the ghost is a little closer, yet he maintains this optimistic, even cheery outlook.

I am overwhelmed by his courage.

What he has to say, what could be underpinning of a book, is the wisdom of his ``reflections`` to deal with death. It's not EST, or Pyramid Power, or any of that crap. Morrie is a little religious, a little new Age - he was born Jewish, but believes in Buddhism as well, so he laughingly calls himself a Bu-Jew`` - but mostly, he's just plain old common sense.

His ``Reflections`` are applicable to a man dying of a fatal illness, but there are also a perfect blueprint for how to live, how to conduct yourself in business, how to perform in social relationships. I listen to them, I read them, and I see the wisdom and philosophy of an entire self-help section.

For example, amongst his ``reflections``:

\* ``A determination to be composed - finding courage, humor and inner peace with your circumstances.``

\* ``Acceptance of what you can do and can't do - and be able to move clearly between each``

- \* ``Anticipating the next crisis''
- \* ``Living in the present''
- \* ``Seeing and accepting yourself as part of nature''
- \* ``Finding time in the day to fully face your dread, horror and anxiety''
- \* ``Allowing your heart be open to your own suffering, but also the suffering of others''
- \* ``Learning to forgive yourself''
- \* ``Finding what is divine or holy to you''
- \* ``Finding joy in unlikely places''

Sure, we've heard some of these ideas before. What makes them different from Morrie is that he sees them with the clarity of his final light. There are so many books about what is important in life, written by people in their 30's and 40's who are still changing their minds about what is important. And there are so many ``hot'' books about death and dying, but most of them talk about preparing for death, or life ``on the other side,'' written by doctors, psychics, faith-healers.

Here is a simple guy who is right there, on the final bridge, and in small, quiet voice, he says, ``I know what matters. I can see it clearly now. You want to know the secret?''

Morrie is not egotistical, and he doesn't wish to preach. He says he is a teacher - he's been one for 40 years - and it makes him feel true to himself to go out teaching, that is all. I got to thinking about a unique project between the two of us, one

that would have a double focus: his enlightenment at the end of life, and how it enlightens those of us like me, still here in the middle.

Morrie's biggest point is that "in learning how to die, you learn how to live."

That is applicable to everyone, don't you think?

So I have this idea. For a book. Not one of those self-help books, or a goobledy-goop guide for living. A story. A true story. About an older guy and a younger guy, who meet once on the road, touch each other's lives, and then meet again, years later, when the older guy is about to die. The younger guy has become a page out of the American success handbook, he's doing way better than the older guy ever did, but there is still something missing. And the older guy, on his deathbed, is still as kind and simple and clear-minded as he always was. They're drawn together again, and the old guy offers the final lessons, which turn out to be, perhaps, the thing that the younger guy was missing all along.

Structure? I know you're going to ask about that. Well, there's clearly there's a time line here. Morrie will probably only live another three months. Maybe we start when I encounter him again, in his house, after all these years, and as we go along, losing him week by week to the disease, we get him back week by week in spirituality and life lessons. In between the visits, we flash



back and forth, to his life and how it exemplifies his generation, to my life and how it is typical of my own generation, and to our connection, then and now, old meeting young, passing the torch, two people waiting, with different fears, for the one final moment in life.

Something like that?

I'm going to be with my old professor, once a week, until the end. I have already watched him decay, watched him lose his legs, his knees, now his fingertips. It's amazing how he deals with it all, fighting it, crying over it, finally accepting it, growing stronger from it. When the final days come, I hope to be with him, along with his family. That part will not be easy, and I'd be lying if I said I knew how I would take it, or how much I could even watch. You know me as a journalist who has always been able to distance himself from painful subjects. I will rely on that. I will also not be ashamed to cry.

All I know, David, is that this is a special person who will not be with us long, and, by twist of fate, he's a person I knew well years ago and there must be a reason we have been reunited. I told Morrie I would probably be visiting him every Tuesday, and he smiled and said there's a perfect title for a book, "Tuesdays With Morrie." He wants to do it, sees it as very different than the small, academic self-help book he's trying to put together himself, and he's kind of flattered that I want to tell his story. He said it would be "our last thesis together."

David, I can't explain this compulsion I have. I'm not a New Age type, as you know, and I've seen and written about many tragedies, even deaths before. This is not new - it's just personal. We all fear the end of our lives, we fear dying too soon, we fear dying without having done what truly matters. Morrie is going where we all fear to go, and he is calling instructions back from the cave. And, David, those instructions hold up for people who are sick and people who are old and people who are young and healthy and doing well and still need to get a grip on what life is supposed to be about. This is important. It needs to be written and it needs to be read. Help me?

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mitch".

Mitch