

"Religious Traditions and Genetic Counseling"

tuesdays with Morrie - by Mitch Albom

tuesdays with Morrie is the story of a dying man afflicted with an illness, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, that wastes his body but not his mind. Rather than spend his final days wallowing in self-pity or avoiding thinking about the inevitable death that awaits him, Morrie makes a conscious decision to live the rest of his life as best he can. To Morrie, this means sharing his time with family and friends, discussing life, death and the fears people have of both living and dying. To one particular friend, Mitch, an old student of Morrie's, the time spent with his old professor in the weeks before his death lead him to rediscover his own feelings about the type of life he wants to lead.

Mitch's experience at Brandeis University includes taking classes with Morrie Schwartz, a professor of Sociology who influences Mitch's development as a young man. Morrie guides Mitch's education through weekly meetings and encourages him to pursue a thesis. Through this process, Morrie becomes more than Mitch's professor; he becomes his friend. At the end of his university days, Mitch leaves school with an idealized view of how his life will be, spurred by the discovery that Morrie supports his dream of becoming a professional musician. However, he becomes disillusioned when he fails to find success. Tired of playing in smoky bars to unappreciative audiences, Mitch finds himself failing for the first time and unable to cope with the death of his close uncle. In reaction, Mitch returns to school for a degree in Journalism and throws himself into work. He finds success in meeting deadlines, making money, buying homes and cars and stocks and bonds. Mitch is successful, and does not think back to his days as a young idealist. This is how he lives until one late night and a chance change of the television channel. He sees a program featuring his old professor, Morrie, who speaks of his experiences with ALS. Here is where the real story of Morrie and Mitch, and the Tuesdays they spend together, begins. Mitch decides to travel to meet with Morrie, not realizing that the weeks until Morrie passes away will profoundly impact his life and the way he wishes to live it.

The first Tuesday that Mitch travels to visit Morrie, Morrie asks him if he can tell him what it's like to die. Mitch is uncomfortable with Morrie's frankness, yet asks himself the question, "What happened to me?" At this point, having visited mainly out of a sense of guilt at not having kept in touch after university, Mitch does not yet realize that the following weeks will be the last, and most important, class he ever takes with Morrie. Each week, they discuss a new topic from a list compiled by Mitch. These discussions aid Morrie in his journey towards death, and Mitch in his journey towards living the life he wishes to live.

Overall, this is a novel about spirituality more than about a particular religion, which is probably the reason I found myself so moved by it. I am not a person who consistently participates in organized religion, yet I consider myself to be very spiritual. I could relate to Morrie's borrowing of quotes and viewpoints from various religions, and to his discussions of basic life philosophies. I attended services at a Presbyterian church when I was growing up. I also attended services at the Mormon church to which my best friend belonged. I have been a guest at a Sikh temple, Catholic masses, Bah'ai services, Christadelphian gatherings, and many services of different protestant denominations. I have read books by and about the Mennonite faith, Quakers, Islam, and the Shinto and Buddhist religions. I have attended Sunday school, youth groups, and bible camps. While this may seem like a preponderance of organized religion for a person who claims herself to not participate in organized religion, I believe that these experiences have helped to shape my own sense of spirituality. In fact, if I were to win the proverbial million dollars, I would not hesitate to return to school and attend classes on religious studies. For this reason, my interest in Tuesdays with Morrie was piqued when I found Morrie's philosophies to be broadly based. I, who also tends not to agree with every aspect of a religion, found myself agreeing with virtually every philosophy that Morrie shared with Mitch.

The first "class" Mitch attended with Morrie involved a discussion of "the World", including reflections about how people do not really care for one another until they are faced with death, the great equalizer. Mitch is amazed that Morrie, so close to death, spends some of his precious time reading newspapers and keeping abreast of current events. Morrie's response is that, in this time of his life, he feels closer to other people who suffer, and is now able to shed a tear for them. This is something that I think of often; people's unwillingness to show basic caring for other people. Moving from a relatively small city to London, England, I was amazed at the

detachment I felt from the people around me. People did not just neglect to hold open doors or say "thank you" when appropriate, but they went so far as to avoid eye contact, walking with their eyes trained on the ground. Morrie ends this session with the words "love is the only rational act", a statement with which I agree. To avoid human interaction for fear of being exploited or rejected or shamed is not a healthy way to live. It is not a coincidence that those people who are friendly, open, and genuinely care about those around them seem to be happiest with themselves.

The second class finds Mitch asking Morrie if he feels sorry for himself. Morrie responds that he does have moments of self-pity, but that he limits the amount of time he spends pitying himself. Perhaps this is a function of Morrie's first point about lack of human interaction: when people stop interacting with each other and focus solely on themselves, they lose perspective on the good things in their lives. It is too easy, without human interaction, to obsess about one's deficits. Exclusively indirect "contact" with other people through newspapers, television and the internet allows a person to separate himself from human experience and results in a diminished compassion he feels for others. Morrie's decision to limit the time he feels sorry for himself is a choice to focus on the good things in his life. Simply being thankful for what one has, rather than distressed about the things one does not have, can not help but frame a person's mindset in a more constructive manner. I believe it allows for a positive outlook and greater compassion for others, and this is something I have found in many of the religious groups with whom I have experience. Particularly within the Mormon faith, the focus on community and the family is so strong that one can not help but see oneself as a part of a bigger whole, rather than a lone, unconnected identity.

On the third Tuesday, Mitch wonders whether Morrie has any regrets. Mitch wonders if he, near to death, would regret choices he had made or things he had missed. In response, Morrie tells Mitch that the reason some people have regrets late in life is because our culture does not allow us time to reflect upon our lives before this point. I wholeheartedly agree with this. We, as a culture, are so focused upon the next dollar, the next purchase, and the next accomplishment that we rarely take time to reflect on what is truly important to us. Personally, I am thankful for the upbringing my siblings and I had. My mother has instilled in us the importance of reflecting upon our lives, our happiness, our relationships, and our sense of self regularly. I have seen friends and peers bluster through their lives, seemingly unaware of what

their true goals are, while I have made choices that seemed out-of-the-ordinary. Spiritually, I have made an effort to search within myself for the definition of what makes a good person, and I think that trying to live without regrets is an important part of this. There are, of course, things which you can not control. However, when one is able to act to avoid a potential regret, I believe one should do so. Perhaps more importantly, one should identify beforehand what potential regrets may be, and act in a way which minimizes those regrets.

On the fourth Tuesday, Mitch brings a list of the important things in life for which he seeks clarity. He and Morrie talk about death, a common experience for each of us, but something that people fear. I suppose it is the unknown which I fear about death; the knowledge that there is something beyond the world I build for myself here that I know nothing about. Perhaps this is the thing with which I grapple with the most when it comes to organized religion. As a child, I believed in Heaven and, I suppose, I still do. Perhaps it would be more truthful to say that I very much hope that there is a Heaven. However, I do not know for certain, and this makes me fear death. I do not fear that I will not be a good person in life, because this is something which I can control. However, the realm that is beyond my control is exactly that, and it does associate death, for me, with some fear. I have heard the Buddhist saying Morrie refers to, about asking the bird on one's shoulder, each day, if one is ready for death, if they are being the person they wish to be. I do ask myself this on a regular basis. If I were to die tomorrow, I would be satisfied with the way I have lived my life. I have identified those things that are the most important to me (developing relationships, honesty, loyalty, kindness, caring, and happiness) and attempt, each and every day, to live by the standards I set for myself. Like Morrie, I try to take time to appreciate the things around me. My mother's favorite saying is "stop and smell the roses", a saying she has instilled in me since the death of her mother. I do not take the lesson she learned from her mother's death lightly, and try to be a person I can be proud of each day.

On the fifth Tuesday, Mitch and Morrie talk about family and, again, I find myself in agreement with Morrie. He believes, as I do, that "if you don't have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don't have much at all" (p. 91). In addition, I do think that there are many forms a family can take, be it blood relatives or not. Some people I know have extremely close families, and the fact that they are not related to each other does not make a difference. More so, a family is a group of people who surround you with love

and support, rather than individuals who share genetic information. My experience with the Christadelphian religion provided an example of this. A very close friend of mine came from a family who were Christadelphian. Their sense of "family" included not only immediate relatives, but also the extended church community. Female Christadelphians are referred to as "sister" and males as "brother", and children appeared to feel comfortable sharing their concerns with others besides their biological parents. This is one aspect of organized religion, particularly the Mormon faith and the Christadelphian faith, which I admire.

On the sixth Tuesday, Mitch and Morrie discuss emotions. Morrie is of the opinion that one should attempt to fully experience emotion, which I also believe. One of his reasons for this is that, by fully experiencing emotion, one will be able to recognize the emotion and subsequently detach oneself from it. This is how he is able to detach himself from the horrors of his illness. I understand the reasoning behind Morrie's logic, and also admit that I can not possibly know the extent of his suffering. Spiritually, I believe in "living in the moment", in experiencing the range of a particular emotion in its entirety. I am not convinced, however, that detaching myself from emotion is something I would want. I understand that detaching oneself from negative emotions (fear, horror), especially when faced with one's own impending death, may be a healthy way to focus on what is important. At the same time, I think it is important to appreciate the emotions for what they mean, whether it is unresolved issues with family or with oneself. In other words, I would emphasize that detachment, while possibly a good coping mechanism, should not be substituted for a thorough evaluation and experience of one's feelings. As Morrie cites, Buddhists say that everything is impermanent and that one should not hold onto things for this reason. I agree, but believe that the distinction between detachment and avoidance is essential.

On the seventh Tuesday, Morrie and Mitch discuss the fear of aging held by so many people in our society. Morrie does not view aging in this way, instead choosing to focus on the growth that occurs as one ages. Those who fear aging have led unfulfilled lives, according to Morrie. I think that this point reflects Morrie's opinions about having regrets in life. Those people who fear aging and dying are likely those same people who have regrets. As they see the ends of their lives approaching, their fear at not reconciling their regrets before they die grows. They are unable to reflect, as Morrie does, upon his life and to value each age he experienced for the lessons it provided him.

On the eighth Tuesday, Morrie and Mitch discuss money, our culture's obsession with material things, and how we are brainwashed to believe in the good of materialism. I would be lying to say that I am not caught up in our culture's obsession with money. However, I attempt to at least recognize and limit the extent to which money controls my life. Attending university in Victoria, B.C. afforded me the opportunity to meet and befriend some very liberal people, more than one of whom now lives in total poverty (by society's standards) but are completely happy. Certainly, money makes daily life easier. However, there are definitely more important things one should desire before money; love, happiness, joy. Oftentimes, when I look at my life and the lives of those around me, I find that the source of unhappiness is money. Sometimes it is because I do not have enough, but often it results from my misconceived notion that money will bring me happiness. The two are separate and I think that only when one is willing to allow happiness into one's life is money able to facilitate that happiness. Perspective is what is important when it comes to money. A person must determine what is truly important to her, and why, rather than hoping money will make her satisfied with herself.

On the ninth Tuesday, Morrie and Mitch talk about how love continues beyond the grave. Morrie tells Mitch that love is what keeps one alive once one is dead, and that, in order to experience love, it is necessary to develop relationships. A large part of this development is the result of really paying attention to the people around you. Morrie talks about something I have noticed, growing up, and only recently come to terms with: people do not really pay attention to other people. Perhaps it is a function of our busy lives. I admit that I have done three other things while at the same time I am speaking on the telephone with someone, and that I have had entire conversations with people as I sit at my computer and search the internet. Paying attention takes time and energy that people do not feel they have. To pay attention to somebody means to give up a part of yourself, and most people do not seem willing to do that. It is a skill that I try to work on every day and one that I truly believe will make me a better person.

On the tenth Tuesday, Morrie and Mitch talk about marriage. I can not contribute personal experience on this topic, but feel as though I at least know what I want in a marriage, something that Morrie feels many young people do not know. In fact, he suggests that too many people either do not know themselves or are too selfish to have a successful marriage. I suppose that this is true, although, from what I have seen, there are many different definitions

of "successful marriage". There are successful marriages which I admire completely and wish to emulate, while there are also successful marriages in which I would not wish to be involved. For me, being ready for marriage means knowing myself and what I want in life. I believe that there are many people with whom I could have a successful marriage, but that a lot of it depends upon timing; is he ready to make a life commitment at the same time as I? As Morrie says, marriage is a test. I think that one has to respect one's partner's strengths and weaknesses as you live through the test together, and that you have to be flexible enough to allow them the growth within the relationship that you wish for yourself.

On the twelfth Tuesday, Mitch and Morrie talk about forgiveness, and Morrie speaks of the importance of forgiving oneself, and then others, before one dies. I particularly agree with his point about forgiving yourself. Life is hard and we will all make mistakes. While it is important to hold yourself to a high standard, I think it is unrealistic to expect yourself to never make a mistake. For this, it is important to forgive yourself. I believe that, as long as the effort to attain your standards was made, that you should have the luxury of forgiving yourself for not hitting the mark every time. Only once you have forgiven yourself, I believe, can you forgive others. To not do so would be selfish.

On the thirteenth Tuesday, Mitch and Morrie discuss "the perfect day", and Mitch is surprised that Morrie's day would be so simple. This, however, is the point. By living one's life being able to take pleasure in simple things, to feel comfortable with one's own company and to be content in one's relationships; these are the pleasures I believe one should think of when they imagine a perfect day.

On the fourteenth Tuesday, Mitch and Morrie say goodbye to each other in what I think is the perfect way. They say that they love one another. For Morrie, the teacher, and Mitch, the student, this acknowledgement encompasses the lessons they have learned from each other. Morrie has passed on the life lessons he has learned and Mitch has found his spirituality awakened and renewed. This book did the same for me. There are times when I get absorbed by daily struggles and forget to reflect upon my spirituality. tuesdays with Morrie reminded me of the importance of reflection.