



tuesdays with Morrie

an old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson by Mitch Albom

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Have you ever had a teacher like this?

The Curriculum

The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves. The class met on Tuesdays. It began after breakfast. The subject was The Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience.

No grades were given, but there were oral exams each week. You were expected to respond to questions, and you were expected to pose questions of your own. You were also required to perform physical tasks now and then, such as lifting the professor's head to a comfortable spot on the pillow or placing his glasses on the bridge of his nose. Kissing him good-bye earned you extra credit.

No books were required, yet many topics were covered, including love, work, community, family, aging, forgiveness, and, finally, death. The last lecture was brief, only a few words.

A funeral was held in lieu of graduation.

Although no final exam was given, you were expected to produce one long paper on what was learned. That paper is presented here.

The last class of my old professor's life had only one student.

I was the student.

It is the late spring of 1979, a hot, sticky Saturday afternoon. Hundreds of us sit together, side by side, in rows of wooden folding chairs on the main campus lawn. We wear blue nylon robes. We listen impatiently to long speeches. When the ceremony is over, we throw our caps in the air, and we are officially graduated from college, the senior class of Brandeis University in the city of Waltham, Massachusetts. For many of us, the curtain has just come down on childhood.

Afterward, I find Morrie Schwartz, my favorite professor, and introduce him to my parents. He is a small man who takes small steps, as if a strong

wind could, at any time, whisk him up into the clouds. In his graduation day robe, he looks like a cross between a biblical prophet and a Christmas elf. He has sparkling blue green eyes, thinning silver hair that spills onto his forehead, big ears, a triangular nose, and tufts of graying eyebrows.

Although his teeth are crooked and his lower ones are slanted back-as if someone had once punched them in-when he smiles it's as if you'd just told him the first joke on earth.

He tells my parents how I took every class he taught. He tells them, "You have a special boy here. " Embarrassed, I look at my feet. Before we leave, I hand my professor a present, a tan briefcase with his initials on the front. I bought this the day before at a shopping mall. I didn't want to forget him.

Maybe I didn't want him to forget me.

"Mitch, you are one of the good ones," he says, admiring the briefcase.

Then he hugs me. I feel his thin arms around my back. I am taller than he is, and when he holds me, I feel awkward, older, as if I were the parent and he were the child. He asks if I will stay in touch, and without hesitation I say,

"Of course."

When he steps back, I see that he is crying.

The Syllabus

His death sentence came in the summer of 1994. Looking back, Morrie knew something bad was coming long before that. He knew it the day he gave up dancing.

He had always been a dancer, my old professor. The music didn't matter.

Rock and roll, big band, the blues. He loved them all. He would close his eyes and with a blissful smile begin to move to his own sense of rhythm. It

wasn't always pretty. But then, he didn't worry about a partner. Morrie danced by himself.

He used to go to this church in Harvard Square every Wednesday night for something called "Dance Free." They had flashing lights and booming speakers and Morrie would wander in among the mostly student crowd, wearing a white T-shirt and black sweatpants and a towel around his neck, and whatever music was playing, that's the music to which he danced. He'd do the lindy to Jimi Hendrix. He twisted and twirled, he waved his arms like a conductor on amphetamines, until sweat was dripping down the middle of his back. No one there knew he was a prominent doctor of sociology, with years of experience as a college professor and several well-respected books. They just thought he was some old nut.

Once, he brought a tango tape and got them to play it over the speakers.

Then he commandeered the floor, shooting back and forth like some hot Latin lover. When he finished, everyone applauded. He could have stayed in that moment forever.

But then the dancing stopped.

He developed asthma in his sixties. His breathing became labored. One day he was walking along the Charles River, and a cold burst of wind left him choking for air. He was rushed to the hospital and injected with Adrenalin.

A few years later, he began to have trouble walking. At a birthday party for a friend, he stumbled inexplicably. Another night, he fell down the steps of a theater, startling a small crowd of people.

"Give him air!" someone yelled.

He was in his seventies by this point, so they whispered "old age" and helped him to his feet. But Morrie, who was always more in touch with his insides than the rest of us, knew something else was wrong. This was more than old age. He was weary all the time. He had trouble sleeping. He dreamt he was dying.

He began to see doctors. Lots of them. They tested his blood. They tested his urine. They put a scope up his rear end and looked inside his intestines.

Finally, when nothing could be found, one doctor ordered a muscle biopsy, taking a small piece out of Morrie's calf. The lab report came back suggesting a neurological problem, and Morrie was brought in for yet another series of tests. In one of those tests, he sat in a special seat as they zapped him with electrical current-an electric chair, of sorts and studied his neurological responses.

"We need to check this further," the doctors said, looking over his results.

"Why?" Morrie asked. "What is it?"

"We're not sure. Your times are slow." His times were slow? What did that mean?

Finally, on a hot, humid day in August 1994, Morrie and his wife, Charlotte, went to the neurologist's office, and he asked them to sit before he broke the news: Morrie had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Lou Gehrig's disease, a brutal, unforgiving illness of the neurological system.

There was no known cure.

"How did I get it?" Morrie asked. Nobody knew.

"Is it terminal?"

Yes.

"So I'm going to die?"

Yes, you are, the doctor said. I'm very sorry.

He sat with Morrie and Charlotte for nearly two hours, patiently answering their questions. When they left, the doctor gave them some information on ALS, little pamphlets, as if they were opening a bank account. Outside, the sun was shining and people were going about their business. A woman ran to put money in the parking meter. Another carried groceries. Charlotte had

a million thoughts running through her mind: How much time do we have left? How will we manage? How will we pay the bills?

My old professor, meanwhile, was stunned by the normalcy of the day around him. Shouldn't the world stop? Don't they know what has happened to me?

But the world did not stop, it took no notice at all, and as Morrie pulled weakly on the car door, he felt as if he were dropping into a hole.

Now what? he thought.

As my old professor searched for answers, the disease took him over, day by day, week by week. He backed the car out of the garage one morning and could barely push the brakes. That was the end of his driving.

He kept tripping, so he purchased a cane. That was the end of his walking free.

He went for his regular swim at the YMCA, but found he could no longer undress himself. So he hired his first home care worker-a theology student named Tony-who helped him in and out of the pool, and in and out of his bathing suit. In the locker room, the other swimmers pretended not to stare.

They stared anyhow. That was the end of his privacy.

In the fall of 1994, Morrie came to the hilly Brandeis campus to teach his final college course. He could have skipped this, of course. The university would have understood. Why suffer in front of so many people? Stay at home. Get your affairs in order. But the idea of quitting did not occur to Morrie.

Instead, he hobbled into the classroom, his home for more than thirty years.

Because of the cane, he took a while to reach the chair. Finally, he sat down, dropped his glasses off his nose, and looked out at the young faces who stared back in silence.

"My friends, I assume you are all here for the Social Psychology class. I have been teaching this course for twenty years, and this is the first time I can say there is a risk in taking it, because I have a fatal illness. I may not live to finish the semester.

"If you feel this is a problem, I understand if you wish to drop the course."

He smiled.

And that was the end of his secret.

ALS is like a lit candle: it melts your nerves and leaves your body a pile of wax. Often, it begins with the legs and works its way up. You lose control of your thigh muscles, so that you cannot support yourself standing. You

lose control of your trunk muscles, so that you cannot sit up straight. By the end, if you are still alive, you are breathing through a tube in a hole in your throat, while your soul, perfectly awake, is imprisoned inside a limp husk, perhaps able to blink, or cluck a tongue, like something from a science fiction movie, the man frozen inside his own flesh. This takes no more than five years from the day you contract the disease.

Morrie's doctors guessed he had two years left. Morrie knew it was less.

But my old professor had made a profound decision, one he began to construct the day he came out of the doctor's office with a sword hanging over his head. Do I wither up and disappear, or do I make the best of my time left? he had asked himself.

He would not wither. He would not be ashamed of dying.

Instead, he would make death his final project, the center point of his days.

Since everyone was going to die, he could be of great value, right? He could be research. A human textbook. Study me in my slow and patient demise. Watch what happens to me. Learn with me.

Morrie would walk that final bridge between life and death, and narrate the trip.

The fall semester passed quickly. The pills increased. Therapy became a regular routine. Nurses came to his house to work with Morrie's withering legs, to keep the muscles active, bending them back and forth as if pumping water from a well. Massage specialists came by once a week to try to soothe the constant, heavy stiffness he felt. He met with meditation teachers, and closed his eyes and narrowed his thoughts until his world shrunk down to a single breath, in and out, in and out.

One day, using his cane, he stepped onto the curb and fell over into the street. The cane was exchanged for a walker. As his body weakened, the back and forth to the bathroom became too exhausting, so Morrie began to urinate into a large beaker. He had to support himself as he did this, meaning someone had to hold the beaker while Morrie filled it.

Most of us would be embarrassed by all this, especially at Morrie's age. But Morrie was not like most of us. When some of his close colleagues would visit, he would say to them, "Listen, I have to pee. Would you mind helping? Are you okay with that?"

Often, to their own surprise, they were.

In fact, he entertained a growing stream of visitors. He had discussion groups about dying, what it really meant, how societies had always been afraid of it without necessarily understanding it. He told his friends that if they really wanted to help him, they would treat him not with sympathy but with visits, phone calls, a sharing of their problems-the way they had always shared their problems, because Morrie had always been a wonderful listener.

For all that was happening to him, his voice was strong and inviting, and his mind was vibrating with a million thoughts. He was intent on proving that the word "dying" was not synonymous with "useless."

The New Year came and went. Although he never said it to anyone, Morrie knew this would be the last year of his life. He was using a wheelchair now, and he was fighting time to say all the things he wanted to say to all the people he loved. When a colleague at Brandeis died suddenly of a heart attack, Morrie went to his funeral. He came home depressed.

"What a waste," he said. "All those people saying all those wonderful things, and Irv never got to hear any of it."

Morrie had a better idea. He made some calls. He chose a date. And on a cold Sunday afternoon, he was joined in his home by a small group of friends and family for a "living funeral." Each of them spoke and paid tribute to my old professor. Some cried. Some laughed. One woman read a poem:

"My dear and loving cousin . . .

Your ageless heart

as you move through time, layer on layer,

tender sequoia . . ."

Morrie cried and laughed with them. And all the heartfelt things we never get to say to those we love, Morrie said that day. His "living funeral" was a rousing success.

Only Morrie wasn't dead yet.

In fact, the most unusual part of his life was about to unfold.

The Student

At this point, I should explain what had happened to me since that summer day when I last hugged my dear and wise professor, and promised to keep in touch.

I did not keep in touch.

In fact, I lost contact with most of the people I knew in college, including my, beer-drinking friends and the first woman I ever woke up with in the morning. The years after graduation hardened me into someone quite different from the strutting graduate who left campus that day headed for New York City, ready to offer the world his talent.

The world, I discovered, was not all that interested. I wandered around my early twenties, paying rent and reading classifieds and wondering why the lights were not turning green for me. My dream was to be a famous musician (I played the piano), but after several years of dark, empty nightclubs, broken promises, bands that kept breaking up and producers who seemed excited about everyone but me, the dream soured. I was failing for the first time in my life.

At the same time, I had my first serious encounter with death. My favorite uncle, my mother's brother, the man who had taught me music, taught me to drive, teased me about girls, thrown me a football-that one adult whom I targeted as a child and said, "That's who I want to be when I grow up"-died of pancreatic cancer at the age of forty-four. He was a short, handsome man with a thick mustache, and I was with him for the last year of his life, living in an apartment just below his. I watched his strong body wither, then bloat, saw him suffer, night after night, doubled over at the dinner table, pressing on his stomach, his eyes shut, his mouth contorted in pain. "Ahhhhh, God,"

he would moan. "Ahhhhhh, Jesus!" The rest of us-my aunt, his two young sons, me-stood there, silently, cleaning the plates, averting our eyes.

It was the most helpless I have ever felt in my life. One night in May, my uncle and I sat on the balcony of his apartment. It was breezy and warm. He looked out toward the horizon and said, through gritted teeth, that he wouldn't be around to see his kids into the next school year. He asked if I would look after them. I told him not to talk that way. He stared at me sadly.

He died a few weeks later.

After the funeral, my life changed. I felt as if time were suddenly precious, water going down an open drain, and I could not move quickly enough. No more playing music at half-empty night clubs. No more writing songs in my apartment, songs that no one would hear. I returned to school. I earned a master's degree in journalism and took the first job offered, as a sports writer. Instead of chasing my own fame, I wrote about famous athletes chasing theirs. I worked for newspapers and freelanced for magazines. I worked at a pace that knew no hours, no limits. I would wake up in the morning, brush my teeth, and sit down at the typewriter in the same clothes

I had slept in. My uncle had worked for a corporation and hated it-same thing, every day-and I was determined never to end up like him.

I bounced around from New York to Florida and eventually took a job in Detroit as a columnist for the Detroit Free Press. The sports appetite in that city was insatiable-they had professional teams in football, basketball, baseball, and hockey-and it matched my ambition. In a few years, I was not only penning columns, I was writing sports books, doing radio shows, and appearing regularly on TV, spouting my opinions on rich football players and hypocritical college sports programs. I was part of the media thunderstorm that now soaks our country. I was in demand.

I stopped renting. I started buying. I bought a house on a hill. I bought cars.

I invested in stocks and built a portfolio. I was cranked to a fifth gear, and everything I did, I did on a deadline. I exercised like a demon. I drove my car at breakneck speed. I made more money than I had ever figured to see. I met a dark-haired woman named Janine who somehow loved me despite my schedule and the constant absences. We married after a seven year courtship. I was back to work a week after the wedding. I told her-and myself-that we would one day start a family, something she wanted very much. But that day never came.

Instead, I buried myself in accomplishments, because with accomplishments, I believed I could control things, I could squeeze in every last piece of happiness before I got sick and died, like my uncle before me, which I figured was my natural fate.

As for Morrie? Well, I thought about him now and then, the things he had taught me about "being human" and "relating to others," but it was always in the distance, as if from another life. Over the years, I threw away any mail that came from Brandeis University, figuring they were only asking for money. So I did not know of Morrie's illness. The people who might have told me were long forgotten, their phone numbers buried in some packed-away box in the attic.

It might have stayed that way, had I not been flicking through the TV

channels late one night, when something caught my ear . . .

The Audiovisual

In March of 1995, a limousine carrying Ted Koppel, the host of ABC-TV's "Nightline" pulled up to the snow-covered curb outside Morrie's house in West Newton, Massachusetts.

Morrie was in a wheelchair full-time now, getting used to helpers lifting him like a heavy sack from the chair to the bed and the bed to the chair. He had begun to cough while eating, and chewing was a chore. His legs were dead; he would never walk again.

Yet he refused to be depressed. Instead, Morrie had become a lightning rod of ideas. He jotted down his thoughts on yellow pads, envelopes, folders, scrap paper. He wrote bite-sized philosophies about living with death's shadow: "Accept what you are able to do and what you are not able to do";

"Accept the past as past, without denying it or discarding it"; "Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others"; "Don't assume that it's too late to get involved."

After a while, he had more than fifty of these "aphorisms," which he shared with his friends. One friend, a fellow Brandeis professor named Maurie Stein, was so taken with the words that he sent them to a Boston Globe reporter, who came out and wrote a long feature story on Morrie. The headline read:

A PROFESSOR'S FINAL COURSE: HIS OWN DEATH

The article caught the eye of a producer from the "Nightline" show, who brought it to Koppel in Washington, D. C.

"Take a look at this," the producer said.

Next thing you knew, there were cameramen in Morrie's living room and Koppel's limousine was in front of the house.

Several of Morrie's friends and family members had gathered to meet Koppel, and when the famous man entered the house, they buzzed with excitement-all except Morrie, who wheeled himself forward, raised his eyebrows, and interrupted the clamor with his high, singsong voice.

"Ted, I need to check you out before I agree to do this interview."

There was an awkward moment of silence, then the two men were ushered into the study. The door was shut. "Man," one friend whispered outside the door, "I hope Ted goes easy on Morrie."

"I hope Morrie goes easy on Ted," said the other.

Inside the office, Morrie motioned for Koppel to sit down. He crossed his hands in his lap and smiled.

"Tell me something close to your heart," Morrie began.

"My heart?"

Koppel studied the old man. "All right," he said cautiously, and he spoke about his children. They were close to his heart, weren't they?

"Good," Morrie said. "Now tell me something, about your faith."

Koppel was uncomfortable. "I usually don't talk about such things with people I've only known a few minutes."

"Ted, I'm dying," Morrie said, peering over his glasses. "I don't have a lot of time here."

Koppel laughed. All right. Faith. He quoted a passage from Marcus Aurelius, something he felt strongly about. Morrie nodded.

"Now let me ask you something," Koppel said. "Have you ever seen my program?"

Morrie shrugged. "Twice, I think." "Twice? That's all?"

"Don't feel bad. I've only seen Oprah' once." "Well, the two times you saw my show, what did you think?"

Morrie paused. "To be honest?"

"Yes?"

"I thought you were a narcissist." Koppel burst into laughter.

"I'm too ugly to be a narcissist," he said.

Soon the cameras were rolling in front of the living room fireplace, with Koppel in his crisp blue suit and Morrie in his shaggy gray sweater. He had refused fancy clothes or makeup for this interview. His philosophy was that death should not be embarrassing; he was not about to powder its nose.

Because Morrie sat in the wheelchair, the camera never caught his withered legs. And because he was still able to move his hands-Morrie always spoke with both hands waving-he showed great passion when explaining how you face the end of life.

"Ted," he said, "when all this started, I asked myself, Am I going to withdraw from the world, like most people do, or am I going to live?' I decided I'm going to live-or at least try to live-the way I want, with dignity, with courage, with humor, with composure.

"There are some mornings when I cry and cry and mourn for myself. Some mornings, I'm so angry and bitter. But it doesn't last too long. Then I get up and say, I want to live . . . '

"So far, I've been able to do it. Will I be able to continue? I don't know. But I'm betting on myself that I will."

Koppel seemed extremely taken with Morrie. He asked about the humility that death induced.

"Well, Fred," Morrie said accidentally, then he quickly corrected himself. "I mean Ted . . . "

"Now that's inducing humility," Koppel said, laughing.

The two men spoke about the afterlife. They spoke about Morrie's increasing dependency on other people. He already needed help eating and sitting and moving from place to place. What, Koppel asked, did Morrie dread the most about his slow, insidious decay?

Morrie paused. He asked if he could say this certain thing on television.

Koppel said go ahead.

Morrie looked straight into the eyes of the most famous interviewer in America. "Well, Ted, one day soon, someone's gonna have to wipe my ass."

The program aired on a Friday night. It began with Ted Koppel from behind the desk in Washington, his voice booming with authority.

"Who is Morrie Schwartz," he said, "and why, by the end of the night, are so many of you going to care about him?"

A thousand miles away, in my house on the hill, I was casually flipping channels. I heard these words from the TV set "Who is Morrie Schwartz?"- and went numb.

It is our first class together, in the spring of 1976. I enter Morrie's large office and notice the seemingly countless books that line the wall, shelf after shelf. Books on sociology, philosophy, religion, psychology. There is a large rug on the hardwood floor and a window that looks out on the campus walk. Only a dozen or so students are there, fumbling with notebooks and syllabi. Most of them wear jeans and earth shoes and plaid flannel shirts. I tell myself it will not be easy to cut a class this small. Maybe I shouldn't take it.

"Mitchell?" Morrie says, reading from the attendance list. I raise a hand.

"Do you prefer Mitch? Or is Mitchell better?"

I have never been asked this by a teacher. I do a double take at this guy in his yellow turtleneck and green corduroy pants, the silver hair that falls on his forehead. He is smiling.

Mitch, I say. Mitch is what my friends called me.

"Well, Mitch it is then," Morrie says, as if closing a deal. "And, Mitch?"

Yes?

"I hope that one day you will think of me as your friend."

The Orientation

As I turned the rental car onto Morrie's street in West Newton, a quiet suburb of Boston, I had a cup of coffee in one hand and a cellular phone between my ear and shoulder. I was talking to a TV producer about a piece we were doing. My eyes jumped from the digital clock-my return flight was in a few hours-to the mailbox numbers on the tree-lined suburban street.

The car radio was on, the all-news station. This was how I operated, five things at once.

"Roll back the tape," I said to the producer. "Let me hear that part again."

"Okay," he said. "It's gonna take a second." Suddenly, I was upon the house.

I pushed the brakes, spilling coffee in my lap. As the car stopped, I caught a glimpse of a large Japanese maple tree and three figures sitting near it in the driveway, a young man and a middleaged woman flanking a small old man in a wheelchair. Morrie.

At the sight of my old professor, I froze.

"Hello?" the producer said in my ear. "Did I lose you?... "

I had not seen him in sixteen years. His hair was thinner, nearly white, and his face was gaunt. I suddenly felt unprepared for this reunion-for one thing, I was stuck on the phone-and I hoped that he hadn't noticed my

arrival, so that I could drive around the block a few more times, finish my business, get mentally ready. But Morrie, this new, withered version of a man I had once known so well, was smiling at the car, hands folded in his lap, waiting for me to emerge.

"Hey?" the producer said again. "Are you there?" For all the time we'd spent together, for all the kindness and patience Morrie had shown me when I was young, I should have dropped the phone and jumped from the car, run and held him and kissed him hello. Instead, I killed the engine and sunk down off the seat, as if I were looking for something.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," I whispered, and continued my conversation with the TV producer until we were finished.

I did what I had become best at doing: I tended to my work, even while my dying professor waited on his front lawn. I am not proud of this, but that is what I did.

Now, five minutes later, Morrie was hugging me, his thinning hair rubbing against my cheek. I had told him I was searching for my keys, that's what had taken me so long in the car, and I squeezed him tighter, as if I could crush my little lie. Although the spring sunshine was warm, he wore a windbreaker and his legs were covered by a blanket. He smelled faintly sour, the way people on medication sometimes do. With his face pressed close to mine, I could hear his labored breathing in my ear.

"My old friend," he whispered, "you've come back at last."

He rocked against me, not letting go, his hands reaching up for my elbows as I bent over him. I was surprised at such affection after all these years, but then, in the stone walls I had built between my present and my past, I had forgotten how close we once were. I remembered graduation day, the briefcase, his tears at my departure, and I swallowed because I knew, deep down, that I was no longer the good, gift-bearing student he remembered.

I only hoped that, for the next few hours, I could fool him.

Inside the house, we sat at a walnut dining room table, near a window that looked out on the neighbor's house. Morrie fussed with his wheelchair, trying to get comfortable. As was his custom, he wanted to feed me, and I said all right. One of the helpers, a stout Italian woman named Connie, cut up bread and tomatoes and brought containers of chicken salad, hummus, and tabouli.

She also brought some pills. Morrie looked at them and sighed. His eyes were more sunken than I remembered them, and his cheekbones more pronounced. This gave him a harsher, older look-until he smiled, of course, and the sagging cheeks gathered up like curtains.

"Mitch," he said softly, "you know that I'm dying."

I knew.

"All right, then." Morrie swallowed the pills, put down the paper cup, inhaled deeply, then let it out. "Shall I tell you what it's like?"

What it's like? To die?

"Yes," he said.

Although I was unaware of it, our last class had just begun.

It is my freshman year. Morrie is older than most of the teachers, and I am younger than most of the students, having left high school a year early. To compensate for my youth on campus, I wear old gray sweatshirts and box in a local gym and walk around with an unlit cigarette in my mouth, even though I do not smoke. I drive a beat-up Mercury Cougar, with the windows down and the music up. I seek my identity in toughness-but it is Morrie's softness that draws me, and because he does not look at me as a kid trying to be something more than I am, I relax.

I finish that first course with him and enroll for another. He is an easy marker; he does not much care for grades. One year, they say, during the

Vietnam War, Morrie gave all his male students A's to help them keep their student deferments.

I begin to call Morrie "Coach," the way I used to address my high school track coach. Morrie likes the nickname.

"Coach, " he says. "All right, I'll be your coach. And you can be my player.

You can play all the lovely parts of life that I'm too old for now."

Sometimes we eat together in the cafeteria. Morrie, to my delight, is even more of a slob than I am. He talks instead of chewing, laughs with his mouth open, delivers a passionate thought through a mouthful of egg salad, the little yellow pieces spewing from his teeth.

It cracks me up. The whole time I know him, I have two overwhelming desires: to hug him and to give him a napkin.

The Classroom

The sun beamed in through the dining room window, lighting up the hardwood floor. We had been talking there for nearly two hours. The phone rang yet again and Morrie asked his helper, Connie, to get it. She had been jotting the callers' names in Morrie's small black appointment book.

Friends. Meditation teachers. A discussion group. Someone who wanted to photograph him for a magazine. It was clear I was not the only one interested in visiting my old professor-the "Nightline" appearance had made him something of a celebrity-but I was impressed with, perhaps even a bit envious of, all the friends that Morrie seemed to have. I thought about the

"buddies" that circled my orbit back in college. Where had they gone?

"You know, Mitch, now that I'm dying, I've become much more interesting to people."

You were always interesting.

"Ho." Morrie smiled. "You're kind." No, I'm not, I thought.

"Here's the thing," he said. "People see me as a bridge. I'm not as alive as I used to be, but I'm not yet dead. I'm sort of . . . in-between."

He coughed, then regained his smile. "I'm on the last great journey here-and people want me to tell them what to pack."

The phone rang again.

"Morrie, can you talk?" Connie asked.

"I'm visiting with my old pal now," he announced. "Let them call back."

I cannot tell you why he received me so warmly. I was hardly the promising student who had left him sixteen years earlier. Had it not been for

"Nightline," Morrie might have died without ever seeing me again. I had no good excuse for this, except the one that everyone these days seems to have.

I had become too wrapped up in the siren song of my own life. I was busy.

What happened to me? I asked myself. Morrie's high, smoky voice took me back to my university years, when I thought rich people were evil, a shirt and tie were prison clothes, and life without freedom to get up and go motorcycle beneath you, breeze in your face, down the streets of Paris, into the mountains of Tibet-was not a good life at all. What happened to me?

The eighties happened. The nineties happened. Death and sickness and getting fat and going bald happened. I traded lots of dreams for a bigger paycheck, and I never even realized I was doing it.

Yet here was Morrie talking with the wonder of our college years, as if I'd simply been on a long vacation.

"Have you found someone to share your heart with?" he asked.

"Are you giving to your community? "Are you at peace with yourself?"

"Are you trying to be as human as you can be?"

I squirmed, wanting to show I had been grappling deeply with such questions. What happened to me? I once promised myself I would never work for money, that I would join the Peace Corps, that I would live in beautiful, inspirational places.

Instead, I had been in Detroit for ten years now, at the same workplace, using the same bank, visiting the same barber. I was thirty-seven, more efficient than in college, tied to computers and modems and cell phones. I wrote articles about rich athletes who, for the most part, could not care less about people like me. I was no longer young for my peer group, nor did I walk around in gray sweatshirts with unlit cigarettes in my mouth. I did not have long discussions over egg salad sandwiches about the meaning of life.

My days were full, yet I remained, much of the time, unsatisfied.

What happened to me?

"Coach," I said suddenly, remembering the nickname.

Morrie beamed. "That's me. I'm still your coach." He laughed and resumed his eating, a meal he had started forty minutes earlier. I watched him now, his hands working gingerly, as if he were learning to use them for the very first time. He could not press down hard with a knife. His fingers shook.

Each bite was a struggle; he chewed the food finely before swallowing, and sometimes it slid out the sides of his lips, so that he had to put down what he was holding to dab his face with a napkin. The skin from his wrist to his knuckles was dotted with age spots, and it was loose, like skin hanging from a chicken soup bone.

For a while, we just ate like that, a sick old man, a healthy, younger man, both absorbing the quiet of the room. I would say it was an embarrassed silence, but I seemed to be the only one embarrassed.

"Dying," Morrie suddenly said, "is only one thing to be sad over, Mitch.

Living unhappily is something else. So many of the people who come to visit me are unhappy." Why?

"Well, for one thing, the culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. We're teaching the wrong things. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it. Create your own. Most people can't do it. They're more unhappy than me-even in my current condition.

"I may be dying, but I am surrounded by loving, caring souls. How many people can say that?"

I was astonished by his complete lack of self-pity. Morrie, who could no longer dance, swim, bathe, or walk; Morrie, who could no longer answer his own door, dry himself after a shower, or even roll over in bed. How could he be so accepting? I watched him struggle with his fork, picking at a piece of tomato, missing it the first two times-a pathetic scene, and yet I could not deny that sitting in his presence was almost magically serene, the same calm breeze that soothed me back in college.

I shot a glance at my watch-force of habit-it was getting late, and I thought about changing my plane reservation home. Then Morrie did something that haunts me to this day.

"You know how I'm going to die?" he said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"I'm going to suffocate. Yes. My lungs, because of my asthma, can't handle the disease. It's moving up my body, this ALS. It's already got my legs.

Pretty soon it'll get my arms and hands. And when it hits my lungs . . .

He shrugged his shoulders.

". . . I'm sunk."

I had no idea what to say, so I said, "Well, you know, I mean . . . you never know."

Morrie closed his eyes. "I know, Mitch. You mustn't be afraid of my dying.

I've had a good life, and we all know it's going to happen. I maybe have four or five months."

Come on, I said nervously. Nobody can say

"I can," he said softly. "There's even a little test. A doctor showed me."

A test?

"Inhale a few times." I did as he said.

"Now, once more, but this time, when you exhale, count as many numbers as you can before you take another breath."

I quickly exhaled the numbers. "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight . .

." I reached seventy before my breath was gone.

"Good," Morrie said. "You have healthy lungs. Now. Watch what I do."

He inhaled, then began his number count in a soft, wobbly voice. "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve-thirteen-fourteen-fifteensixteen-seventeen-eighteen-"

He stopped, gasping for air.

"When the doctor first asked me to do this, I could reach twenty-three. Now it's eighteen."

He closed his eyes, shook his head. "My tank is almost empty."

I tapped my thighs nervously. That was enough for one afternoon.

"Come back and see your old professor," Morrie said when I hugged him good-bye.

I promised I would, and I tried not to think about the last time I promised this.

In the campus bookstore, I shop for the items on Morrie's reading list. I purchase books that I never knew existed, titles such as Youth: Identity and Crisis, I and Thou, The Divided Self.

Before college I did not know the study of human relations could be considered scholarly. Until I met Morrie, I did not believe it.

But his passion for books is real and contagious. We begin to talk seriously sometimes, after class, when the room has emptied. He asks me questions about my life, then quotes lines from Erich Fromm, Martin Buber, Erik Erikson. Often he defers to their words, footnoting his own advice, even though he obviously thought the same things himself. It is at these times that I realize he is indeed a professor, not an uncle. One afternoon, I am complaining about the confusion of my age, what is expected of me versus what I want for myself.

"Have I told you about the tension of opposites?" he says. The tension of opposites?

"Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else. Something hurts you, yet you know it shouldn't. You take certain things for granted, even when you know you should never take anything for granted.

"A tension of opposites, like a pull on a rubber band. And most of us live somewhere in the middle. "

Sounds like a wrestling match, I say.

"A wrestling match." He laughs. "Yes, you could describe life that way."

So which side wins, I ask? " Which side wins?"

He smiles at me, the crinkled eyes, the crooked teeth.

"Love wins. Love always wins."

Taking Attendance

I flew to London a few weeks later. I was covering Wimbledon, the world's premier tennis competition and one of the few events I go to where the crowd never boos and no one is drunk in the parking lot. England was warm and cloudy, and each morning I walked the treelined streets near the tennis courts, passing teenagers cued up for leftover tickets and vendors selling strawberries and cream. Outside the gate was a newsstand that sold a halfdozen colorful British tabloids, featuring photos of topless women, paparazzi pictures of the royal family, horoscopes, sports, lottery contests, and a wee bit of actual news. Their top headline of the day was written on a small chalkboard that leaned against the latest stack of papers, and usually read something like DIANA IN ROW WITH CHARLES! or GAZZA TO

TEAM: GIVE ME MILLIONS!

People scooped up these tabloids, devoured their gossip, and on previous trips to England, I had always done the same. But now, for some reason, I found myself thinking about Morrie whenever I read anything silly or mindless. I kept picturing him there, in the house with the Japanese maple and the hardwood floors, counting his breath, squeezing out every moment with his loved ones, while I spent so many hours on things that meant absolutely nothing to me personally: movie stars, supermodels, the latest noise out of Princess Di or Madonna or John F. Kennedy, Jr. In a strange way, I envied the quality of Morrie's time even as I lamented its diminishing

supply. Why did we, bother with all the distractions we did? Back home, the O. J. Simpson trial was in full swing, and there were people who surrendered their entire lunch hours watching it, then taped the rest so they could watch more at night. They didn't know O. J. Simpson. They didn't know anyone involved in the case. Yet they gave up days and weeks of their lives, addicted to someone else's drama.

I remembered what Morrie said during our visit: "The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it."

Morrie, true to these words, had developed his own culture-long before he got sick. Discussion groups, walks with friends, dancing to his music in the Harvard Square church. He started a project called Greenhouse, where poor

people could receive mental health services. He read books to find new ideas for his classes, visited with colleagues, kept up with old students, wrote letters to distant friends. He took more time eating and looking at nature and wasted no time in front of TV sitcoms or "Movies of the Week."

He had created a cocoon of human activities-conversation, interaction, affection-and it filled his life like an overflowing soup bowl.

I had also developed my own culture. Work. I did four or five media jobs in England, juggling them like a clown. I spent eight hours a day on a computer, feeding my stories back to the States. Then I did TV pieces, traveling with a crew throughout parts of London. I also phoned in radio reports every morning and afternoon. This was not an abnormal load. Over the years, I had taken labor as my companion and had moved everything else to the side.

In Wimbledon; I ate meals at my little wooden work cubicle and thought nothing of it. On one particularly crazy day, a crush of reporters had tried to chase down Andre Agassi and his famous girlfriend, Brooke Shields, and I had gotten knocked over by a British photographer who barely muttered

"Sorry" before sweeping past, his huge metal lenses strapped around his

neck. I thought of something else Morrie had told me: "So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."

I knew he was right.

Not that I did anything about it.

At the end of the tournament-and the countless cups of coffee I drank to get through it-I closed my computer, cleaned out my cubicle, and went back to the apartment to pack. It was late. The TV was nothing but fuzz.

I flew to Detroit, arrived late in the afternoon, dragged myself home and went to sleep. I awoke to a jolting piece of news: the unions at my newspaper had gone on strike. The place was shut down. There were picketers at the front entrance and marchers chanting up and down the street. As a member of the union, I had no choice: I was suddenly, and for the first time in my life, out of a job, out of a paycheck, and pitted against my employers. Union leaders called my home and warned me against any contact with my former editors, many of whom were my friends, telling me to hang up if they tried to call and plead their case.

"We're going to fight until we win!" the union leaders swore, sounding like soldiers.

I felt confused and depressed. Although the TV and radio work were nice supplements, the newspaper had been my lifeline, my oxygen; when I saw my stories in print in each morning, I knew that, in at least one way, I was alive.

Now it was gone. And as the strike continued-the first day, the second day, the third day-there were worried phone calls and rumors that this could go on for months. Everything I had known was upside down. There were sporting events each night that I would have gone to cover. Instead, I stayed home, watched them on TV. I had grown used to thinking readers somehow needed my column. I was stunned at how easily things went on without me.

After a week of this, I picked up the phone and dialed Morrie's number.

Connie brought him to the phone. "You're coming to visit me," he said, less a question than a statement.

Well. Could I?

"How about Tuesday?"

Tuesday would be good, I said. Tuesday would be fine.

In my sophomore year, I take two more of his courses. We go beyond the classroom, meeting now and then just to talk. I have never done this before

with an adult who was not a relative, yet I feel comfortable doing it with Morrie, and he seems comfortable making the time.

"Where shall we visit today?" he asks cheerily when I enter his office.

In the spring, we sit under a tree outside the sociology building, and in the winter, we sit by his desk, me in my gray sweatshirts and Adidas sneakers, Morrie in Rockport shoes and corduroy pants. Each time we talk, he listens to me ramble, then he tries to pass on some sort of life lesson. He warns me that money is not the most important thing, contrary to the popular view on campus. He tells me I need to be "fully human." He speaks of the alienation of youth and the need for "connectedness" with the society around me.

Some of these things I understand, some I do not. It makes no difference.

The discussions give me an excuse to talk to him, fatherly conversations I cannot have with my own father, who would like me to be a lawyer.

Morrie hates lawyers.

"What do you want to do when you get out of college?" he asks.

I want to be a musician, I say. Piano player. "Wonderful," he says. "But that's a hard life." Yeah.

"A lot of sharks." That's what I hear.

"Still," he says, "if you really want it, then you'll make your dream happen.

"

I want to hug him, to thank him for saying that, but I am not that open. I only nod instead.

"I'll bet you play piano with a lot of pep," he says. I laugh. Pep?

He laughs back. "Pep. What's the matter? They don't say that anymore?"

The First Tuesday We Talk About the World

Connie opened the door and let me in. Morrie was in his wheelchair by the kitchen table, wearing a loose cotton shirt and even looser black sweatpants.

They were loose because his legs had atrophied beyond normal clothing size-you could get two hands around his thighs and have your fingers touch.

Had he been able to stand, he'd have been no more than five feet tall, and he'd probably have fit into a sixth grader's jeans.

"I got you something," I announced, holding up a brown paper bag. I had stopped on my way from the airport at a nearby supermarket and purchased some turkey, potato salad, macaroni salad, and bagels. I knew there was plenty of food at the house, but I wanted to contribute something. I was so powerless to help Morrie otherwise. And I remembered his fondness for eating.

"Ah, so much food!" he sang. "Well. Now you have to eat it with me."

We sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by wicker chairs. This time, without the need to make up sixteen years of information, we slid quickly into the familiar waters of our old college dialogue, Morrie asking questions, listening to my replies, stopping like a chef to sprinkle in something I'd forgotten or hadn't realized. He asked about the newspaper strike, and true to form, he couldn't understand why both sides didn't simply communicate with each other and solve their problems. I told him not everyone was as smart as he was.

Occasionally, he had to stop to use the bathroom, a process that took some time. Connie would wheel him to the toilet, then lift him from the chair and support him as he urinated into the beaker. Each time he came back, he looked tired.

"Do you remember when I told Ted Koppel that pretty soon someone was gonna have to wipe my ass?" he said.

I laughed. You don't forget a moment like that. "Well, I think that day is coming. That one bothers me."

Why?

"Because it's the ultimate sign of dependency. Someone wiping your bottom. But I'm working on it. I'm trying to enjoy the process."

Enjoy it?

"Yes. After all, I get to be a baby one more time." That's a unique way of looking at it.

"Well, I have to look at life uniquely now. Let's face it. I can't go shopping, I can't take care of the bank accounts, I can't take out the garbage. But I can sit here with my dwindling days and look at what I think is important in life. I have both the time-and the reason-to do that."

So, I said, in a reflexively cynical response, I guess the key to finding the meaning of life is to stop taking out the garbage?

He laughed, and I was relieved that he did.

As Connie took the plates away, I noticed a stack of newspapers that had obviously been read before I got there.

You bother keeping up with the news, I asked? "Yes," Morrie said. "Do you think that's strange? Do you think because I'm dying, I shouldn't care what happens in this world?"

Maybe.

He sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I shouldn't care. After all, I won't be around to see how it all turns out.

"But it's hard to explain, Mitch. Now that I'm suffering, I feel closer to people who suffer than I ever did before. The other night, on TV, I saw people in Bosnia running across the street, getting fired upon, killed, innocent victims . . . and I just started to cry. I feel their anguish as if it were

my own. I don't know any of these people. But-how can I put this?-I'm almost . . . drawn to them."

His eyes got moist, and I tried to change the subject, but he dabbed his face and waved me off.

"I cry all the time now," he said. "Never mind."

Amazing, I thought. I worked in the news business. I covered stories where people died. I interviewed grieving family members. I even attended the funerals. I never cried. Morrie, for the suffering of people half a world away, was weeping. Is this what comes at the end, I wondered? Maybe death is the great equalizer, the one big thing that can finally make strangers shed a tear for one another.

Morrie honked loudly into the tissue. "This is okay with you, isn't it? Men crying?"

Sure, I said, too quickly.

He grinned. "Ah, Mitch, I'm gonna loosen you up. One day, I'm gonna show you it's okay to cry."

Yeah, yeah, I said. "Yeah, yeah," he said.

We laughed because he used to say the same thing nearly twenty years earlier. Mostly on Tuesdays. In fact, Tuesday had always been our day together. Most of my courses with Morrie were on Tuesdays, he had office hours on Tuesdays, and when I wrote my senior thesis which was pretty much Morrie's suggestion, right from the start-it was on Tuesdays that we sat together, by his desk, or in the cafeteria, or on the steps of Pearlman Hall, going over the work.

So it seemed only fitting that we were back together on a Tuesday, here in the house with the Japanese maple out front. As I readied to go, I mentioned this to Morrie.

"We're Tuesday people," he said. Tuesday people, I repeated.

Morrie smiled.

"Mitch, you asked about caring for people I don't even know. But can I tell you the thing I'm learning most with this disease?"

What's that?

"The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Let it come in. We think we don't deserve love, we think if we let it in we'll become too soft. But a wise man named Levine said it right. He said, 'Love is the only rational act.' "

He repeated it carefully, pausing for effect. " 'Love is the only rational act.'

"

I nodded, like a good student, and he exhaled weakly. I leaned over to give him a hug. And then, although it is not really like me, I kissed him on the cheek. I felt his weakened hands on my arms, the thin stubble of his whiskers brushing my face.

"So you'll come back next Tuesday?" he whispered.

He enters the classroom, sits down, doesn't say anything. He looks at us, we look at him. At first, there are a few giggles, but Morrie only shrugs, and eventually a deep silence falls and we begin to notice the smallest sounds, the radiator humming in the corner of the room, the nasal breathing of one of the fat students.

Some of us are agitated. When is he going to say something? We squirm, check our watches. A few students look out the window, trying to be above it all. This goes on a good fifteen minutes, before Morrie finally breaks in with a whisper.

"What's happening here?" he asks.

And slowly a discussion begins as Morrie has wanted all along-about the effect of silence on human relations. My are we embarrassed by silence?

What comfort do we find in all the noise?

I am not bothered by the silence. For all the noise I make with my friends, I am still not comfortable talking about my feelings in front of others-especially not classmates. I could sit in the quiet for hours if that is what the class demanded.

On my way out, Morrie stops me. "You didn't say much today," he remarks.

I don't know. I just didn't have anything to add.

"I think you have a lot to add. In fact, Mitch, you remind me of someone I knew who also liked to keep things to himself when he was younger."

Who?

"Me."

The Second Tuesday We Talk About Feeling Sorry for Yourself I came back the next Tuesday. And for many Tuesdays that followed. I looked forward to these visits more than one would think, considering I was flying seven hundred miles to sit alongside a dying man. But I seemed to slip into a time warp when I visited Morrie, and I liked myself better when I was there. I no longer rented a cellular phone for the rides from the airport.

Let them wait, I told myself, mimicking Morrie.

The newspaper situation in Detroit had not improved. In fact, it had grown increasingly insane, with nasty confrontations between picketers and replacement workers, people arrested, beaten, lying in the street in front of delivery trucks.

In light of this, my visits with Morrie felt like a cleansing rinse of human kindness. We talked about life and we talked about love. We talked about one of Morrie's favorite subjects, compassion, and why our society had such a shortage of it. Before my third visit, I stopped at a market called Bread

and Circus-I had seen their bags in Morrie's house and figured he must like the food there-and I loaded up with plastic containers from their fresh food take-away, things like vermicelli with vegetables and carrot soup and baklava.

When I entered Morrie's study, I lifted the bags as if I'd just robbed a bank.

"Food man!" I bellowed.

Morrie rolled his eyes and smiled.

Meanwhile, I looked for signs of the disease's progression. His fingers worked well enough to write with a pencil, or hold up his glasses, but he could not lift his arms much higher than his chest. He was spending less and less time in the kitchen or living room and more in his study, where he had a large reclining chair set up with pillows, blankets, and specially cut pieces of foam rubber that held his feet and gave support to his withered legs. He kept a bell near his side, and when his head needed adjusting or he had to

"go on the commode," as he referred to it, he would shake the bell and Connie, Tony, Bertha, or Amy-his small army of home care workers-would come in. It wasn't always easy for him to lift the bell, and he got frustrated when he couldn't make it work.

I asked Morrie if he felt sorry for himself.

"Sometimes, in the mornings," he said. "That's when I mourn. I feel around my body, I move my fingers and my hands-whatever I can still move-and I mourn what I've lost. I mourn the slow, insidious way in which I'm dying.

But then I stop mourning."

Just like that?

"I give myself a good cry if I need it. But then I concentrate on all the good things still in my life. On the people who are coming to see me. On the

stories I'm going to hear. On you-if it's Tuesday. Because we're Tuesday people."

I grinned. Tuesday people.

"Mitch, I don't allow myself any more self-pity than that. A little each morning, a few tears, and that's all."

I thought about all the people I knew who spent many of their waking hours feeling sorry for themselves. How useful it would be to put a daily limit on self-pity. just a few tearful minutes, then on with the day. And if Morrie could do it, with such a horrible disease . . .

"It's only horrible if you see it that way," Morrie said. "It's horrible to watch my body slowly wilt away to nothing. But it's also wonderful because of all the time I get to say good-bye."

He smiled. "Not everyone is so lucky."

I studied him in his chair, unable to stand, to wash, to pull on his pants.

Lucky? Did he really say lucky?

During a break, when Morrie had to use the bathroom, I leafed through the Boston newspaper that sat near his chair. There was a story about a small timber town where two teenage girls tortured and killed a seventy-three-year-old man who had befriended them, then threw a party in his trailer home and showed off the corpse. There was another story, about the upcoming trial of a straight man who killed a gay man after the latter had gone on a TV talk show and said he had a crush on him.

I put the paper away. Morrie was rolled back in smiling, as always-and Connie went to lift him from the wheelchair to the recliner.

You want me to do that? I asked.

There was a momentary silence, and I'm not even sure why I offered, but Morrie looked at Connie and said, "Can you show him how to do it?"

"Sure," Connie said.

Following her instructions, I leaned over, locked my forearms under Morrie's armpits, and hooked him toward me, as if lifting a large log from underneath. Then I straightened up, hoisting him as I rose. Normally, when you lift someone, you expect their arms to tighten around your grip, but Morrie could not do this. He was mostly dead weight, and I felt his head bounce softly on my shoulder and his body sag against me like a big damp loaf.

"Ahhhn," he softly groaned.

I gotcha, I gotcha, I said.

Holding him like that moved me in a way I cannot describe, except to say I felt the seeds of death inside his shriveling frame, and as I laid him in his chair, adjusting his head on the pillows, I had the coldest realization that our time was running out.

And I had to do something.

It is my junior year, 1978, when disco and Rocky movies are the cultural rage. We are in an unusual sociology class at Brandeis, something Morrie

calls "Group Process." Each week we study the ways in which the students in the group interact with one another, how they respond to anger, jealousy, attention. We are human lab rats. More often than not, someone ends up crying. I refer to it as the "touchy -feely" course. Morrie says I should be more open-minded.

On this day, Morrie says he has an exercise for us to try. We are to stand, facing away from our classmates, and fall backward, relying on another student to catch us. Most of us are uncomfortable with this, and we cannot let go for more than a few inches before stopping ourselves. We laugh in embarrassment. Finally, one student, a thin, quiet, dark-haired girl whom I notice almost always wears bulky white fisherman sweaters, crosses her arms over her chest, closes her eyes, leans back, and does not flinch, like

one of those Lipton tea commercials where the model splashes into the pool.

For a moment, I am sure she is going to thump on the floor. At the last instant, her assigned partner grabs her head and shoulders and yanks her up harshly.

"Whoa!" several students yell. Some clap. Morrie _finally smiles.

"You see," he says to the girl, "you closed your eyes. That was the difference. Sometimes you cannot believe what you see, you have to believe what you feel. And if you are ever going to have other people trust you, you must feel that you can trust them, too-even when you're in the dark. Even when you're falling. "

The Third Tuesday We Talk About Regrets

The next Tuesday, I arrived with the normal bags of food-pasta with corn, potato salad, apple cobbler--and something else: a Sony tape recorder.

I want to remember what we talk about, I told Morrie. I want to have your voice so I can listen to it . . . later.

"When I'm dead." Don't say that.

He laughed. "Mitch, I'm going to die. And sooner, not later."

He regarded the new machine. "So big," he said. I felt intrusive, as reporters often do, and I began to think that a tape machine between two people who were supposedly friends was a foreign object, an artificial ear. With all the people clamoring for his time, perhaps I was trying to take too much away from these Tuesdays.

Listen, I said, picking up the recorder. We don't have to use this. If it makes you uncomfortable

He stopped me, wagged a finger, then hooked his glasses off his nose, letting them dangle on the string around his neck. He looked me square in the eye. "Put it down," he said.

I put it down.

"Mitch," he continued, softly now, "you don't understand. I want to tell you about my life. I want to tell you before I can't tell you anymore."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "I want someone to hear my story. Will you?"

I nodded.

We sat quietly for a moment.

"So," he said, "is it turned on?"

Now, the truth is, that tape recorder was more than nostalgia. I was losing Morrie, we were all losing Morrie--his family, his friends, his ex-students, his fellow professors, his pals from the political discussion groups that he loved so much, his former dance partners, all of us. And I suppose tapes, like photographs and videos, are a desperate attempt to steal something from death's suitcase.

But it was also becoming clear to me -through his courage, his humor, his patience, and his openness-that Morrie was looking at life from some very different place than anyone else I knew. A healthier place. A more sensible place. And he was about to die.

If some mystical clarity of thought came when you looked death in the eye, then I knew Morrie wanted to share it. And I wanted to remember it for as long as I could.

The first time I saw Morrie on "Nightline," I wondered what regrets he had once he knew his death was imminent. Did he lament lost friends? Would he have done much differently? Selfishly, I wondered if I were in his shoes, would I be consumed with sad thoughts of all that I had missed? Would I regret the secrets I had kept hidden?

When I mentioned this to Morrie, he nodded. "It's what everyone worries about, isn't it? What if today were my last day on earth?" He studied my

face, and perhaps he saw an ambivalence about my own choices. I had this vision of me keeling over at my desk one day, halfway through a story, my editors snatching the copy even as the medics carried my body away.

"Mitch?" Morrie said.

I shook my head and said nothing. But Morrie picked up on my hesitation.

"Mitch," he said, "the culture doesn't encourage you to think about such things until you're about to die. We're so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money, meeting the mortgage, getting a new car, fixing the radiator when it breaks—we're involved in trillions of little acts just to keep going. So we don't get into the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, Is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?"

He paused.

"You need someone to probe you in that direction. It won't just happen automatically."

I knew what he was saying. We all need teachers in our lives.

And mine was sitting in front of me.

Fine, I figured. If I was to be the student, then I would be as good a student as I could be.

On the plane ride home that day, I made a small list on a yellow legal pad, issues and questions that we all grapple with, from happiness to aging to having children to death. Of course, there were a million self-help books on

these subjects, and plenty of cable TV shows, and \$90-per-hour consultation sessions. America had become a Persian bazaar of self-help.

But there still seemed to be no clear answers. Do you take care of others or take care of your "inner child"? Return to traditional values or reject tradition as useless? Seek success or seek simplicity? Just Say No or just Do It? All I knew was this: Morrie, my old professor, wasn't in the self-help

business. He was standing on the tracks, listening to death's locomotive whistle, and he was very clear about the important things in life.

I wanted that clarity. Every confused and tortured soul I knew wanted that clarity.

"Ask me anything," Morrie always said.

So I wrote this list:

Death

Fear

Aging

Greed

Marriage

Family

Society

Forgiveness

A meaningful life

The list was in my bag when I returned to West Newton for the fourth time, a Tuesday in late August when the air-conditioning at the Logan Airport

terminal was not working, and people fanned themselves and wiped sweat angrily from their foreheads, and every face I saw looked ready to kill somebody.

By the start of my senior year, I have taken so many sociology classes, I am only a few credits shy of a degree. Morrie suggests I try an honors thesis.

Me? I ask. What would I write about?

"What interests you?" he says.

We bat it back and forth, until we finally settle on, of all things, sports. I begin a year-long project on how football in America has become ritualistic, almost a religion, an opiate for the masses. I have no idea that this is training for my future career. I only know it gives me another once-a-week session with Morrie.

And, with his help, by spring I have a 112 page thesis, researched, footnoted, documented, and neatly bound in black leather. I show it to Morrie with the pride of a Little Leaguer rounding the bases on his first home run.

"Congratulations," Morrie says.

I grin as he leafs through it, and I glance around his office. The shelves of books, the hardwood floor, the throw rug, the couch. I think to myself that I have sat just about everywhere there is to sit in this room.

"I don't know, Mitch," Morrie muses, adjusting his glasses as he reads,

"with work like this, we may have to get you back here for grad school."

Yeah, right, I say.

I snicker, but the idea is momentarily appealing. Part of me is scared of leaving school. Part of me wants to go desperately. Tension of opposites. I watch Morrie as he reads my thesis, and wonder what the big world will be like out there.

The Audiovisual, Part Two

The "Nightline" show had done a follow-up story on Morrie partly because the reception for the first show had been so strong. This time, when the cameramen and producers came through the door, they already felt like family. And Koppel himself was noticeably warmer. There was no feeling-out process, no interview before the interview. As warm-up, Koppel and

Morrie exchanged stories about their childhood backgrounds: Koppel spoke of growing up in England, and Morrie spoke of growing up in the Bronx.

Morrie wore a long-sleeved blue shirt—he was almost always chilly, even when it was ninety degrees outside—but Koppel removed his jacket and did the interview in shirt and tie. It was as if Morrie were breaking him down, one layer at a time.

"You look fine," Koppel said when the tape began to roll.

"That's what everybody tells me," Morrie said. "You sound fine."

"That's what everybody tells me."

"So how do you know things are going downhill?"

Morrie sighed.. "Nobody can know it but me, Ted. But I know it."

And as he spoke, it became obvious. He was not waving his hands to make a point as freely as he had in their first conversation. He had trouble pronouncing certain words—the l sound seemed to get caught in his throat. In a few more months, he might no longer speak at all.

"Here's how my emotions go," Morrie told Koppel. "When I have people and friends here, I'm very up. The loving relationships maintain me.

"But there are days when I am depressed. Let me not deceive you. I see certain things going and I feel a sense of dread. What am I going to do without my hands? What happens when I can't speak? Swallowing, I don't care so much about—so they feed me through a tube, so what? But my voice?

My hands? They're such an essential part of me. I talk with my voice. I gesture with my hands. This is how I give to people."

"How will you give when you can no longer speak?" Koppel asked.

Morrie shrugged. "Maybe I'll have everyone ask me yes or no questions."

It was such a simple answer that Koppel had to smile. He asked Morrie about silence. He mentioned a dear friend Morrie had, Maurie Stein, who had first sent Morrie's aphorisms to the Boston Globe. They had been together at Brandeis since the early sixties. Now Stein was going deaf.

Koppel imagined the two men together one day, one unable to speak, the other unable to hear. What would that be like?

"We will hold hands," Morrie said. "And there'll be a lot of love passing between us. Ted, we've had thirty-five years of friendship. You don't need speech or hearing to feel that."

Before the show ended, Morrie read Koppel one of the letters he'd received.

Since the first "Nightline" program, there had been a great deal of mail. One particular letter came from a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania who taught a special class of nine children; every child in the class had suffered the death of a parent.

"Here's what I sent her back," Morrie told Koppel, perching his glasses gingerly on his nose and ears. " `Dear Barbara . . . I was very moved by your letter. I feel the work you have done with the children who have lost a parent is very important. I also lost a parent at an early age . . . ' "

Suddenly, with the cameras still humming, Morrie adjusted the glasses. He stopped, bit his lip, and began to choke up. Tears fell down his nose. " I

lost my mother when I was a child . . . and it was quite a blow to me . . . I wish I'd had a group like yours where I would have been able to talk about my sorrows. I would have joined your group because . . . "

His voice cracked.

" ` . . . because I was so lonely . . . "

"Morrie," Koppel said, "that was seventy years ago your mother died. The pain still goes on?"

"You bet," Morrie whispered.

The Professor

He was eight years old. A telegram came from the hospital, and since his father, a Russian immigrant, could not read English, Morrie had to break the news, reading his mother's death notice like a student in front of the class.

"We regret to inform you . . ." he began.

On the morning of the funeral, Morrie's relatives came down the steps of his tenement building on the poor Lower East Side of Manhattan. The men wore dark suits, the women wore veils. The kids in the neighborhood were going off to school, and as they passed, Morrie looked down, ashamed that his classmates would see him this way. One of his aunts, a heavysset woman, grabbed Morrie and began to wail: "What will you do without your mother?

What will become of you?"

Morrie burst into tears. His classmates ran away.

At the cemetery, Morrie watched as they shoveled dirt into his mother's grave. He tried to recall the tender moments they had shared when she was alive. She had operated a candy store until she got sick, after which she mostly slept or sat by the window, looking frail and weak. Sometimes she would yell out for her son to get her some medicine, and young Morrie, playing stickball in the street, would pretend he did not hear her. In his mind he believed he could make the illness go away by ignoring it.

How else can a child confront death?

Morrie's father, whom everyone called Charlie, had come to America to escape the Russian Army. He worked in the fur business, but was constantly out of a job. Uneducated and barely able to speak English, he was terribly poor, and the family was on public assistance much of the time. Their apartment was a dark, cramped, depressing place behind the candy store.

They had no luxuries. No car. Sometimes, to make money, Morrie and his younger brother, David, would wash porch steps together for a nickel.

After their mother's death, the two boys were sent off to a small hotel in the Connecticut woods where several families shared a large cabin and a

communal kitchen. The fresh air might be good for the children, the relatives thought. Morrie and David had never seen so much greenery, and they ran and played in the fields. One night after dinner, they went for a walk and it began to rain. Rather than come inside, they splashed around for hours.

The next morning, when they awoke, Morrie hopped out of bed.

"Come on," he said to his brother. "Get up." "I can't."

"What do you mean?"

David's face was panicked. "I can't . . . move."

He had polio.

Of course, the rain did not cause this. But a child Morrie's age could not understand that. For a long time-as his brother was taken back and forth to a special medical home and was forced to wear braces on his legs, which left him limping-Morrie felt responsible.

So in the mornings, he went to synagogue-by himself, because his father was not a religious man-and he stood among the swaying men in their long black coats and he asked God to take care of his dead mother and his sick brother.

And in the afternoons, he stood at the bottom of the subway steps and hawked magazines, turning whatever money he made over to his family to buy food.

In the evenings, he watched his father eat in silence, hoping for-but never getting--a show of affection, communication, warmth.

At nine years old, he felt as if the weight of a mountain were on his shoulders.

But a saving embrace came into Morrie's life the following year: his new stepmother, Eva. She was a short Romanian immigrant with plain features, curly brown hair, and the energy of two women. She had a glow that warmed the otherwise murky atmosphere his father created. She talked when her new husband was silent, she sang songs to the children at night.

Morrie took comfort in her soothing voice, her school lessons, her strong character. When his brother returned from the medical home, still wearing leg braces from the polio, the two of them shared a rollaway bed in the kitchen of their apartment, and Eva would kiss them good-night. Morrie waited on those kisses like a puppy waits on milk, and he felt, deep down, that he had a mother again.

There was no escaping their poverty, however. They lived now in the Bronx, in a one-bedroom apartment in a redbrick building on Tremont Avenue, next to an Italian beer garden where the old men played boccie on summer evenings. Because of the Depression, Morrie's father found even less work in the fur business. Sometimes when the family sat at the dinner table, all Eva could put out was bread.

"What else is there?" David would ask.

"Nothing else," she would answer.

When she tucked Morrie and David into bed, she would sing to them in Yiddish. Even the songs were sad and poor. There was one about a girl trying to sell her cigarettes:

Please buy my cigarettes.

They are dry, not wet by rain.

Take pity on me, take pity on me.

Still, despite their circumstances, Morrie was taught to love and to care.

And to learn. Eva would accept nothing less than excellence in school, because she saw education as the only antidote to their poverty. She herself

went to night school to improve her English. Morrie's love for education was hatched in her arms.

He studied at night, by the lamp at the kitchen table. And in the mornings he would go to synagogue to say Yizkor-the memorial prayer for the dead-for his mother. He did this to keep her memory alive. Incredibly, Morrie had been told by his father never to talk about her. Charlie wanted young David to think Eva was his natural mother.

It was a terrible burden to Morrie. For years, the only evidence Morrie had of his mother was the telegram announcing her death. He had hidden it the day it arrived.

He would keep it the rest of his life.

When Morrie was a teenager, his father took him to a fur factory where he worked. This was during the Depression. The idea was to get Morrie a job.

He entered the factory, and immediately felt as if the walls had closed in around him. The room was dark and hot, the windows covered with filth, and the machines were packed tightly together, churning like train wheels.

The fur hairs were flying, creating a thickened air, and the workers, sewing the pelts together, were bent over their needles as the boss marched up and down the rows, screaming for them to go faster. Morrie could barely breathe. He stood next to his father, frozen with fear, hoping the boss wouldn't scream at him, too.

During lunch break, his father took Morrie to the boss and pushed him in front of him, asking if there was any work for his son. But there was barely enough work for the adult laborers, and no one was giving it up.

This, for Morrie, was a blessing. He hated the place. He made another vow that he kept to the end of his life: he would never do any work that exploited someone else, and he would never allow himself to make money off the sweat of others.

"What will you do?" Eva would ask him.

"I don't know," he would say. He ruled out law, because he didn't like lawyers, and he ruled out medicine, because he couldn't take the sight of blood.

"What will you do?"

It was only through default that the best professor I ever had became a teacher.

"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops. "

-HENRY ADAMS

The Fourth Tuesday We Talk About Death

"Let's begin with this idea," Morrie said. "Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it." He was in a businesslike mood this Tuesday.

The subject was death, the first item on my list. Before I arrived, Morrie had scribbled a few notes on small white pieces of paper so that he wouldn't forget. His shaky handwriting was now indecipherable to everyone but him.

It was almost Labor Day, and through the office window I could see the spinach-colored hedges of the backyard and hear the yells of children playing down the street, their last week of freedom before school began.

Back in Detroit, the newspaper strikers were gearing up for a huge holiday demonstration, to show the solidarity of unions against management. On the plane ride in, I had read about a woman who had shot her husband and two daughters as they lay sleeping, claiming she was protecting them from "the bad people." In California, the lawyers in the O. J. Simpson trial were becoming huge celebrities.

Here in Morrie's office, life went on one precious day at a time. Now we sat together, a few feet from the newest addition to the house: an oxygen machine. It was small and portable, about knee-high. On some nights, when he couldn't get enough air to swallow, Morrie attached the long plastic tubing to his nose, clamping on his nostrils like a leech. I hated the idea of Morrie connected to a machine of any kind, and I tried not to look at it as Morrie spoke.

"Everyone knows they're going to die," he said again, "but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently."

So we kid ourselves about death, I said.

"Yes. But there's a better approach. To know you're going to die, and to be prepared for it at any time. That's better. That way you can actually be more

involved in your life while you're living."

How can you ever be prepared to die?

"Do what the Buddhists do. Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, 'Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?'" "

He turned his head to his shoulder as if the bird were there now.

"Is today the day I die?" he said.

Morrie borrowed freely from all religions. He was born Jewish, but became an agnostic when he was a teenager, partly because of all that had happened to him as a child. He enjoyed some of the philosophies of Buddhism and Christianity, and he still felt at home, culturally, in Judaism. He was a religious mutt, which made him even more open to the students he taught over the years. And the things he was saying in his final months on earth seemed to transcend all religious differences. Death has a way of doing that.

"The truth is, Mitch," he said, "once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

I nodded.

"I'm going to say it again," he said. "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." He smiled, and I realized what he was doing. He was making sure I absorbed this point, without embarrassing me by asking. It was part of what made him a good teacher.

Did you think much about death before you got sick, I asked.

"No." Morrie smiled. "I was like everyone else. I once told a friend of mine, in a moment of exuberance, 'I'm gonna be the healthiest old man you ever met!'" "How old were you?"

"In my sixties."

So you were optimistic.