

“Tuesdays with Jesus” (Gary)

Everyone needs a teacher in their life, a wise guide or mentor. The best teachers are the ones who not only have book learning but also heart knowledge, who convey a message not merely with their words but also with the power and example of their lives. The finest teachers seem to understand the real meaning of education, which comes from a root that literally means “to lead out.” They don’t try to impose their thoughts on others so much as to draw forth the student’s own inward appreciation of the truth.

The lessons they teach are the one’s we’re all trying to learn. How to live without bitterness. Where to find serenity. What our priorities ought to be, so that we don’t waste our years on meaningless pursuits and come to the end of our days empty-handed and alone. How to be happy. How to face death with calm and courage.

For some, the instructor might be an historical figure like Jesus, whom his disciples called rabbi or teacher. More and more modern Biblical scholars are beginning to think of the historical Jesus in that role, a wandering sage who challenged his listeners to a deeper understanding of what it meant to live compassionately, as sisters and brothers, like God intended. It’s said in the scriptures that people marveled when he taught, because he spoke not as the scribes--those who copied and memorized the ancient texts and gained their information second-hand--but as one who had authority.

But authority comes in all shapes and sizes. For some, the teacher might be female, for others male. For some, the teacher might even be a little old man with bristly white hair, horn rimmed glasses and a crooked, toothy grin. He might live in West Newton, Massachusetts, rather than in ancient Palestine, or in some far off, exotic ashram. He could even be someone like Morris Schwartz, more a wise guy than stereotypical wise man.

Morrie became a teacher for millions of people when ABC’s Nightline decided to document the last few months of his life after he was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gerhig’s disease, back in 1995. And he inspired many more through the writings of his former student Mitch Albom, who reconnected with the favorite professor he’d had as an undergraduate at Brandeis, and then recorded the weekly conversations they shared during the dying man’s final passage as the basis for his book *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

Albom relates how Morrie had gone out of his way to befriend him as a young college student. He was one of those rare professors who took an interest in his pupils outside the classroom, who actually participated in the sophomore bull sessions about the meaning of life and encouraged kids to dream big. During the Vietnam War, he gave all the boys in his classes “A’s” and convinced other faculty to do the same so the young men wouldn’t lose their student deferrals and get drafted. For Mitch, Morrie became as much a father figure as thesis advisor, and after graduating, Mitch promised to stay in touch, but never followed through. The relationship lapsed. Mitch got caught up in his own career, climbing up the ladder of success, and never gave his old professor

another thought until he saw him on national TV with Ted Koppel, being asked what it feels like to know he's dying.

Mitch's story reminds me of another tale Jesus once told about a prodigal son. A father had two boys. One wandered off as soon as he was grown, disappeared and cut off contact with his family, squandered his fortune and ruined his health until he had no resources left to fall back on and then returned home. His father threw a great banquet to welcome the child back. And the other brother, who's dutifully stayed by his father's side and tended to family responsibilities, is hurt and outraged at the reception his sibling receives. But the father's attitude is different. How can he do anything except celebrate the lost child's return?

So Mitch feels like a nebbisch, a "nobody," calling Morrie up after such a long absence. It's been years since they said goodbye at graduation, but Morrie welcomes the prodigal back with open arms.

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 ... 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 as human as you can be?"

I squirmed, wanted 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. My days were full, yet I remained, much of time, unsatisfied. What happened to me?

To answer that question, Mitch and Morrie embark on their last tutorial, a class on what it's all about, taught weekly in the old professors home. There was no reading list required. Assignments included some physical tasks, like lifting the professors head to a more comfortable spot on the pillow. Topics covered included success and failure, living and dying, and the purpose of existence.

Overhearing the exchange is a little like listening to the Sermon on the Mount delivered in a Bronx accent with a little wry Jewish humor thrown in. But I don't suppose Jesus talked in Elizabethan cadences, either, despite everything the King James translators did to make him sound like Lionel Barrymore. He spoke in simple, everyday language, like Morrie, and the lessons were largely the same: share and care, forgive and forget, money and material possessions don't buy inward satisfaction. That's a big theme for both of them. You can hardly turn a page of the gospels without running across a commentary on worldly wealth: sayings about camels passing through eyes of needles, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. "Don't lay up treasures for yourself here on earth, where rust corrodes and thieves break in," Jesus said. "But lay up treasures in heaven, for where you treasure is, there will your heart be also." This is how Morrie puts it:

"Wherever I went in my life, I met people want to gobble up something new. Gobble up a new car. Gobble up a new piece of property. And then they wanted to tell you about it. 'Guess what I got? Guess what I got?'"

"You know how I always interpreted that? These were people so hungry for love that they were accepted substitutes. They were embracing material things and expecting a sort of hug back. But it never works. You can't substitute material things for love or tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have."

I glanced around Morrie's study. It was the same today as it had been the first day I arrived. The papers cluttered the same old desk. The outside rooms had not been improved or upgraded. In fact, Morrie really hadn't bought anything new—except medical equipment—in a long time, maybe years. The day he learned that he was terminally ill was the day he lost interest in his purchasing power.

So the TV was the same old model, the car that his wife Charlotte drove was the same old model, the dishes and the silverware and the towels—all the same. And yet the house had changed so drastically. It had filled with love and teaching and communication. It had filled with friendship and family and honest and tears. It had filled with colleagues and students and meditation teachers and therapists and nurses and a capella groups. It had become, in a very real way, a wealthy home, even though Morrie's bank account was rapidly depleting.

Caring really is what matters most, more than money; more than possessions, people matter. Give your heart away and all life's joy comes flowing back. The kingdom of heaven is among us, between us, in the quality of our interactions. Love your neighbors, love your enemies, sinners, publicans, republicans. That's a teaching that genuine wisemen and wise women all seem to agree on.

Jesus was visiting the home of a Pharisee when a woman who was a sinner came through the door and began to weep as she anointed his feet with ointment. And the Pharisee said "if this man were a real prophet, he wouldn't let this sort of woman even touch him." But he calls Jesus "teacher" and asks him to explain. And Jesus responds

that it doesn't matter how much the woman has sinned. What counts is how much she has loved. Loving is more important than being pure or being right. Mitch remembers his student days, when Morrie put it this way:

In the campus bookstore, I shop for 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. 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 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 saw.

"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."

The test is to go on loving even when life is difficult, when others disappoint us, in the midst of conflict, in times of adversity. And the greatest challenge is to go on loving, appreciating and celebrating life even in the face of death. Everyone dies, even the young, even the innocent who don't deserve it, even the most exalted and godlike. That's part of what the Easter story says to me. But what Easter also says is that it nonetheless remains possible to rejoice in life, despite the sorrowful and tragic endings that are so much a part of human experience. Take away the supernatural aspects—because you don't necessarily have to believe in heaven or the empty tomb or an immortal soul or the resurrection of the body, although you can believe any of them if you want—but take all the miracles away, and in the gospels you still have an affirmation that despite the death of Jesus, life continues, love continues, hope continues and even humor persists, which may be the greatest miracle of all.

As the paralysis overtakes Morrie's body, it starts to reach his lungs, where it will all end. But the disease doesn't seem to affect his funny bone.

Morrie wanted to be cremated. The rabbi from Brandeis, Al Axelrad—a longtime friend who had been chosen to conduct the funeral service—had come to visit Morrie,

and Morrie told him of his plans. "And Al?" "Yes?" "Make sure they don't overcook me."

The rabbi was stunned. But Morrie was able to joke about his body now. The closer he got to the end, the more he saw it as a mere shell, a container for the soul. It was withering to useless skin and bones anyhow, which made it easier to let go.

"We are so afraid of the sight of death," Morrie told me when I sat down. Morrie coughed. He was coughing all the time now.

The oxygen tube was up his nose. I hated the sight of it. To me, it symbolized helplessness. I wanted to pull it out.

"Last night ..." Morrie said softly.

Yes? Last night?

"... I had a terrible spell. It went on for hours. And I really wasn't sure I was going to make it. No breath. No end to the choking. At one point, I started to get dizzy ... and then I felt a certain peace, I felt that I was ready to let go."

His eyes widened. "Mitch, it was a most incredible feeling. The sensation of accepting what was happening, being at peace. I was thinking about a dream I had last week, where I was crossing a bridge into something unknown. Being ready to move on to whatever is next."

But you didn't.

Morrie waited a moment. He shook his head slightly. "No, I didn't. But I felt that I could." "Do you understand? That's what we're all looking for. A certain peace with the idea of dying. If we know, in the end, that we can ultimately have that peace with dying, then we can finally do the really hard thing."

Which is?

"Make peace with living."

"Peace is my parting gift to you," says Jesus to his disciples at the end, "my own peace, such as the world cannot give. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears." I think it's this same peace that Morrie speaks about. It comes from a deep sense of trust and acceptance about the order of the universe, birth and growth and aging and death. It comes from feeling a part of nature, where beginnings and endings flow in endless procession. It comes from a willingness to embrace and venture into the unknown, the great mystery from which we emerge and to which all eventually return. It comes from having lived life fully and passionately, laughed and wept, danced and labored, loved and lost and grieved and loved some more.

Make peace with dying and you'll find peace with living. Take it from an old professor, take it from the Bible. Or if you like, take it from me. But take it.

And now may the peace that passes understanding, the peace of God which the world can neither give nor take away, be with us all on this bright Easter morn.