

**From Morrie to Heaven: To Appreciate the
People who Enrich Our Lives
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I recently read Mitch Albom's new book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. As many of you are aware, Albom, a well-respected sports columnist, is the author of the bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the story of Morrie Schwartz, one of Albom's professors at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Morrie died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's Disease). *Tuesdays with Morrie* was based on weekly interviews that Albom conducted with his former professor prior to the latter's death. During the interviews Morrie shared his philosophy of life. At a time when people are searching for meaning in their lives, it is little wonder that millions were captivated by Morrie's warmth, courage, and insight.

The Five People You Meet in Heaven is a truly thought-provoking book, which has as its main character a man named Eddie, based on Albom's uncle, Eddie Beitchman, who died a couple of years ago. The book's Eddie is an 83-year-old amusement park repairman who lost his wife at an early age. He has no children and he feels that he has led a meaningless existence. During the first chapter Eddie is killed attempting to save a little girl from a defective ride.

After his death he arrives in heaven and encounters a man with blue skin. This blue man worked years earlier at the same amusement park at which Eddie was employed; the blue man was on display in the freak show. Eddie discovers that as a young boy he unintentionally caused an auto accident that killed the blue man. The latter explains, "There are five people you meet in heaven. Each of us was in your life for a reason at the time, and that is what heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth."

In his latest book Albom proposes that all of our lives are interconnected, and given the complexity of these connections it is impossible to fully appreciate the consequences that our actions may have on others. In some ways Albom's perspective reminded me of a major premise in *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield, namely, that people's lives cross for a reason. However, in addition to the theme of

connectedness, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* includes Albom's intriguing view of heaven.

In an article in *Parade* magazine Albom writes, "A few years ago I found Eddie's old Army boots. I put them on my desk. And I began to write a book about a character just like him, a working man who dies. His name is also Eddie. Only, in my story, he finds a fate in death that is better than what he'd endured in life. Inspired by my uncle's tale of the waiting spirits (note: Eddie often told a story about a night he was rushed to the hospital for open-heart surgery and teetered at the edge of death. He recounted that he saw dead relatives sitting at the edge of his bed and told them "Get the heck out of here! I ain't ready for you yet!"), I wove my own concept of heaven—one in which five people wait to explain your life on Earth.

"The fictional Eddie thinks his blue-collar life was meaningless; he finds out thanks to the five people he meets, that he was wrong, that his life was purposeful and heroic in ways he never knew. It's a nice idea, isn't it? That heaven is where our loved ones, especially the underappreciated ones, finally learn their significance?"

The Five People You Meet in Heaven is likely to evoke many discussions and perhaps a few sermons by the clergy. It touches upon matters of spirituality and the heart. I believe we can and should reflect upon our relationships and what brings purpose to our lives even if we do not accept the proposition that the meaning of our existence on earth is best explained in heaven.

However, rather than my focusing on Albom's central treatise about heaven (perhaps that is best left to the clergy, although there is no lack of opinion about the topic of heaven among lay people), in this article I wish to address a theme he poignantly described in the *Parade* magazine article, a theme that captured my attention since it is one that I have been writing and lecturing about for years. Albom states, "The last time I saw him, he was frail and on oxygen. He could barely stand. I told him of the places I'd recently traveled to, and he smiled weakly. I knew it was goodbye. At his funeral, I delivered the eulogy. I broke down halfway through and started crying uncontrollably. It was sadness, yes, but also regret. I had never said those loving things to his face."

Albom continues, "Who knows? Maybe you really do meet five people in heaven. If so, wherever Eddie is now, I hope he understands: You mattered. You were

loved. We all have wonderful people in our lives—but when they're gone, it seems, all we can do is miss them. I miss Eddie's toughness. I miss our phone calls from airports. I rub my arm now, where Eddie would have punched me, and I realize I have never met anyone as magical as my uncle seemed to me as a boy. He should have known that. And I wish I had told him."

Albom's words struck a deep chord within me and resonated with some of my strongest beliefs. In my writings and presentations I have encouraged people (and myself) to seek opportunities to communicate to others feelings of appreciation, thanks, and love. I have often shared stories of my father, an immigrant whose formal education was limited because he had to work to support his younger siblings and his mother (my father's father died when my father was a child). Although he possessed the equivalent of a sixth or seventh grade education, his skills as a father, a husband, and a friend and his capacity to demonstrate and communicate empathy and love would have placed him in the genius range of "emotional intelligence" as described by psychologist Daniel Goleman. My father personified the philosophy that it takes very little to say or do something that adds to the joy of another person. In his own simple but powerful manner he helped others to feel a little more special and appreciated. What a beautiful legacy he left for relatives and friends!

As many of my readers are aware, research indicates that one of the most important factors that contributes to resilience in children is the presence of at least one person in their lives who believes in them. The late psychologist Julius Segal described that person as a "charismatic adult," a person from whom children "gather strength." At my workshops I have been asked if we need charismatic adults in our lives even when we are adults. The answer is yes. Throughout our lives we need people who provide encouragement, support, and unconditional love.

However, as important as it is to interact with charismatic adults, it is also vital to serve as a charismatic adult for others. In our new book *The Power of Resilience*, which focuses on resilience in adults, my close friend and colleague Sam Goldstein and I review research that highlights the emotional and physical well-being that accompanies the act of contributing to or helping others. We suggest you do the following exercise:

List three people in your current life whom you would judge to be your charismatic adults, that is, three people from whom you gather strength, three people towards whom you would turn should you need support. What do they say or do that places them in the category of charismatic adults?

List three people who served as charismatic adults for you during your childhood. What did they say or do that led you to list them as charismatic adults?

List three people in your current life who would name you as their charismatic adult. What do you say and do that would lead them to list you as a charismatic adult?

As you reflect upon these questions, consider those actions that would qualify someone as a charismatic adult. I have heard various answers in my workshops, clinical practice, and through correspondence. Without wishing to simplify a complex area, a fundamental theme is “this person took a few seconds to help me feel a little more appreciated, accepted, recognized, and loved.” I frequently ask participants at my workshops, especially teachers and mental health professionals, if they have ever received a note of thanks from a former student or patient or client. It is uplifting to view the smile on the faces of people who describe being the recipient of such a message. However, when I next ask if they have written or conveyed such a message to a favorite teacher or mentor or coach, many say no.

To enrich our own existence and the existence of others, let us set aside time to express to others the importance they hold for us. As a psychologist, I have heard too many regrets of not having said something to a significant person until it was too late. I have heard too many comments such as: “I think he knew I loved him” or “I wish I had told her what a positive impact she had on my life” or “I never really thanked him for what he did for me.”

Mitch Albom is to be admired for his self-reflection and honesty when he describes crying uncontrollably while giving his uncle’s eulogy because “I never said those loving things to his face” and “I realize I have never met anyone as magical as my uncle seemed to me as a boy. He should have known that. And I wish I had told him.”

Think about one or two people who have been charismatic adults in your life. If you have not communicated appreciation to them and they are still alive, write to them and let them know the place they hold in your heart. I regularly receive letters from

people who share the joy of both receiving and expressing such messages. The simplest gestures often have the most far-reaching results. As I learned from my father, although there are many things in this world that are beyond our control, it is within our power to engage in activities that dignify the life of others; in the process we dignify and strengthen our own lives. We must replace regrets of actions not taken with the pleasure of knowing we have not allowed precious opportunities to pass us by.

In closing I am reminded of the words of Charles Dickens who wrote, “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it for anyone else” and Walt Whitman who noted, “When I give, I give myself.” These are words well worth remembering.

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