

Revisiting the Treasured Insights of Morrie Schwartz

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How often have you read a book and returned to re-read it several years later? I have done so only on a few occasions. I am well aware that many books deserve a second or a third reading, but as I prepare to pick them up, I glance at the stack of books I have yet to read and the latter take priority. However, there are a few books that I have re-read on several occasions. They tend to be writings that provide insights about living a more purposeful, meaningful life—insights that resonate with some of the main themes I address in my own writings about hope and resilience. One such book is Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, and another is Rabbi Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

A third is *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. As many of you are aware, the book is based on weekly interviews that Albom conducted with Morrie Schwartz, a sociology professor at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, the university from which Albom graduated in 1979. Morrie died in 1995 of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (commonly known as Lou Gehrig's Disease), and the book is based on weekly interviews that Albom conducted with Morrie prior to the latter's death. During the interviews Morrie, faced with his debilitating, terminal illness, shared his insights about living and dying. I read the book when it was first published in 1997 and then again in 2003 after reading Albom's new book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*.

A recent article in *The Boston Globe* by Richard Harris prompted me to read *Tuesdays with Morrie* once again. Harris notes that almost 20 years ago he came across an article in *The Boston Globe* titled "A Professor's Final Course: His Own Death." It was written by Jack Thomas. "The story of a retired Brandeis sociology professor stricken with ALS who was given 12 to 18 months to live, was surprisingly upbeat. Rather than curling up in the fetal position, Morrie Schwartz irreverently held a memorial service for himself so that he could hear friends tell him what he meant to them while he was still alive."

At the time Harris was working for ABC News and brought the article to Ted Koppel, the host of *Nightline*. This led Koppel to conduct three interviews with Morrie at

the latter's house (all three may be found on YouTube). When the first interview was aired, Albom was watching from his home in Detroit, where he was a sportswriter and also appeared regularly on ESPN. Albom contacted Morrie and arranged to visit him. There were 16 Tuesday visits in all. Harris reports that given the richness of the interviews, Albom's intention was to publish a small book that would help defray the costs of Morrie's medical expenses.

Interestingly, Albom's manuscript was rejected by many publishers with such comments as "Too much of a downer" and "Too much of a specialized disease." Finally, a few weeks before Morrie died in 1995, Albom received an acceptance from Doubleday. Harris states, "But Morrie never read one word of *Tuesdays with Morrie* and of course, never knew it became the biggest-selling memoir in the history of publishing according to Albom's agent, the David Black Agency. The hardcover, paperback, and audio versions have sold more than 16 million copies worldwide and have been translated into 45 languages, from Bengali to Burmese and Hindu to Malay." The book was made into a TV movie as well as a two-character play, which continues to be produced around the world. The book sells approximately 200,000 copies each year.

Why the ongoing popularity? Morrie's insights are simple, genuine, powerful, and timeless. They serve as catalysts for self-reflection at any age. It is not surprising that high school teachers have included the book as part of their curriculum and that many copies of the book have been purchased by schools. In conducting the interviews and writing the book, Albom's life was transformed. Harris observes that before Albom began to interview Morrie, "He freely concedes he was self-absorbed, ambitious, and wondered how many more years he could work. Today, Albom constantly hears Morrie's voice and devotes much of his time to eight charities around the world, including an orphanage he runs in Haiti with 41 kids he sees every month."

Albom interviewed Morrie about a different theme each Tuesday. I have selected two topics to highlight in this article, both of which have occupied an important place in my personal and professional life.

Connections and Charitable Activities

A message in many of my writings and lectures emphasizes the importance of the connections we have with others as nutrients for our own physical and emotional well-

being. Morrie addressed this theme with eloquence in one of his Tuesday interviews: “So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they’re 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.”

Morrie poignantly elaborated on this perspective. “Why do you think it’s so important for me to hear other people’s problems. Don’t I have enough pain and suffering of my own? Of course I do. But giving to other people is what makes me feel alive. Not my car or my house. Not what I look like in the mirror. When I give my time, when I can make someone smile after they were feeling sad, it’s as close to healthy as I ever feel.”

It is little wonder that Alбом, so influenced by the words and advice of his former professor, initiated significant changes in his own life, adopting a more giving, charitable outlook. Most of us do not have the financial resources nor the public platform that Alбом has earned to accomplish all of the charitable endeavors that he has. However, I believe it essential that in whatever ways we can, we engage in activities that enrich the lives of others. As I reported in my September, 2014 article, I was troubled by the vast majority of middle and high school students who rated high achievement as a more important goal than caring for others. These teenagers voiced the opinion that their parents also valued achievement over caring for others.

A lack of connectedness and charity is associated with loneliness, a theme I hope to address in a future article. As a brief preview, Gretchen Anderson in a piece for AARP.org, emphasized that “loneliness was a significant predictor of poor health.” Those who rated their health as “excellent” were much less likely to be lonely than those who rated their health as “poor.”

Forgiveness and Self-Compassion

Alбом asked Morrie about the theme of forgiveness. Morrie responded, “It’s not just other people we need to forgive. We also need to forgive ourselves.” When Alбом inquired, “Ourselves?” Morrie replied, “For all the things we didn’t do. All the things we should have done. You can’t get stuck on the regrets of what should have happened.

That doesn't help you when you get to where I am. . . . You need to make peace with yourself and everyone around you.”

I devoted my March, 2011 article to the theme of self-compassion, which is closely linked to self-forgiveness—with some believing that to forgive oneself, one must first experience self-compassion. In my 2011 article I cited the work of Dr. Kristin Neff, a faculty member in human development at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*. The title of her book captures the reality that many people are very harsh with themselves and it is difficult for them to be self-forgiving.

Neff writes, “Self-compassion entails three core components. First it requires *self-kindness*, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental.” A second component “requires recognition of our *common humanity*, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering. Third, it requires *mindfulness*—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it.”

Margarita Tartakovsky summarized several of Neff's strategies for developing self-compassion in an article published on the website PsychCentral.com. They include:

Consider how you would treat someone else. Imagine if a friend came to you after experiencing a negative event such as being rejected. “What would you say to that person? How would you treat them?” Then we should ask if we would treat ourselves the same way we would recommend our friends treat themselves.

Watch your language. Sometimes we are not even aware of the way we speak to ourselves and how critical we are. As I read this, I thought of a woman I saw in therapy who during the course of our work together recognized that how her typical, almost automatic response to even minor mistakes was to think, “I never do anything right” or “Why do I always get everything wrong?” Thoughts such as these served only to reinforce her negative self-image and lessen the possibility for self-compassion and self-forgiveness.

Comfort yourself with a physical gesture. This is a very intriguing suggestion. Neff contends that a physical gesture associated with kindness such as placing your hands

over your heart lessens negative thoughts while increasing self-compassion. I think it's certainly worth a try.

Memorize a set of compassionate phrases. To offset negative comments such as "I'm not a very good person," Neff recommends producing genuine positive statements combined with a comforting physical gesture such as holding one's hands over one's heart. Tartakovsky observes that Neff uses the following phrase to reinforce self-compassion:

This is a moment of suffering.

Suffering is part of life.

May I be kind to myself in this moment?

May I give myself the compassion I need?

Tartakovsky emphasizes that engaging in these kinds of strategies will be more difficult for some people than others, especially if one has experienced a great deal of trauma. In such instances, working with a therapist is strongly recommended.

Always a Teacher

Tuesdays with Morrie is a work filled with this remarkable man's insights and aphorisms about how to live and die with compassion and dignity. It is little wonder that when Morrie was asked to write the first paragraph of his obituary, he responded, "It might say, Morrie Schwartz, 79 years old, died yesterday—and to the end of his life, he was a teacher."

I don't believe that Morrie could have predicted the vast number of people throughout the world who would be inspired by his teaching. He has left a legacy that continues to grow; any of us who have been fortunate enough to read his words are the beneficiaries of his wisdom.

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