

Book review on *Tuesdays with Morrie*

By Hui Zin Yiu, Samuel

Life's Greatest Lesson

"Shall I tell you what's it like?"

What it's like? To die?

"Yes."

And so, in a quiet suburb of Boston, a remarkable drama unfolds. Life's greatest lesson - love. Taught not by knowledge, but by experience. Delivered not by any professor, but a dying one.

Crippled by the ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), a disease that insidiously and painfully tortures away the last breath of a man, Morrie Schwartz was confined to his small study, strapped down by medical machines, and barred from the world that he so loves. Gone were his privacy and comfort. Gone were the days when he could dance and eat with perfect liberty. All that remained was a withering body, and a clock slowly ticking the remaining hours of life.

But was it to be only this?

A lesser man might have quailed under such unthinkable conditions - slavery to his own body, devoid of any hopes of escape, and literally, unable to even "wipe his ass". But not Morrie. He embraced these last moments. He relished them as a cherished opportunity to "become a baby again". He transformed what others deem hell into a paradise of enlightenment and remembrance. And he never forgot his role as a teacher. Reunited by fate in the form of Ted Koppel and his program "Nightline", Morrie Schwartz and Mitch Albom, teacher and student, were brought together one last time to travel life's greatest adventure. Their last thesis, the thesis of death.

This book is about death, yet it is also about life. Nature's fundamental: with life comes death. Yet, Morrie teaches an even more important lesson: without death, there would be no life. Without death, we would not learn to cherish life. Our time would be but meaningless moments to be whiled away in doldrums. Morrie understands. And so, in his deathbed, he preaches to us about dying, and through this, ultimately, living.

Dying is not synonymous with useless. Morrie was a firm believer of this, as am I. The one moment we are still living, the one moment we can still contribute. For all those living, death is unavoidable, as inevitable as falling leaves in autumn. It is how we live our lives that makes all the difference. Samuel Johnson, litterateur, once said, "It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time." Morrie entertains a similar idea, but his is so

much more heartfelt. Because he is what he teaches.

Perhaps the most special part of the book is its personal and very real account of death. No matter what we say, all of us do fear death. What happens after we die? Looking deeper, underlying this fear is actually the fear of the unknown. We, humans, are comfortable in our so-called superior knowledge. We believe that our existence is to unravel mysteries and gain wisdom. We are therefore mortally afraid of what is unbeknownst to us, simply because we have gotten used to knowing. Afterlife, or simply the question on what happens after death, is one of the latter. Save from dying ourselves, we do not know the answer, nor will we ever find out in our lives. Most of all, we fear the unpredictability of death. Is my end scheduled today? Or is it tomorrow? We never know.

To alleviate this fear, we invent beautiful and flowery words to replace the all-mighty and all-feared word "death". We call it "gone on" or "pass away". We imagine an afterlife of paradise for the good but perdition for the bad. We even try to impede death by refusing to acknowledge its existence, by turning our back and saying, "There is still all the time in the world for me." But deep in the recess of our hearts, we know. We know that one day, death will overtake us. We know that we are but trying to avoid the inevitable. We know that with every second of every day, time is bringing us ever closer to the end.

Yet, rather than to run away at first sight, Morrie believes that we should open our arms to embrace death fearlessly. Death is but a part of life, a natural end to a natural beginning. Morrie teaches us simply to accept it, and to prepare for it at all times. "Once you learn to die, you learn to live." So he said.

And so we should live, with love. Or as Morrie puts it, "Love each other, or perish." Love is what sets humanity apart. We alone love not by instinct, but through our soul. Through this, families, friendships, compassion, and verily, all human traits are borne. Love is indeed the only rational act, because it is the root of life. It is what humans stand for.

Yet, we have forgotten. In this materialistic world, we have forgotten the importance of love. We have sacrificed our hearts, our souls for physical temptations. We hound wealth. We chase fame. We pursue glory. Yet, in the process, we have lost ourselves, our true selves. Mitch, himself, is living testimony. Immersed in his work as a sports journalist, he found himself neglecting everything he once held dear – his family, his friends, his dreams, and even his coach, Morrie himself. He was drowning in a job that knew no hours, slave to his ambition for a bigger paycheck and better toys, an ambition that is both insatiable and pernicious.

And he was saved. Like a life buoy, Morrie, crippled in body but whole in heart, held out his arms, ever patient, ever supportive. He showed that it was never too late

to change. So long as you had the determination. So long as you were willing. He demonstrated how to live through his own dying. He gave Mitch fourteen lessons on love, life and death. Fourteen lessons in fourteen Tuesdays. Fourteen lessons that are passed on to us in this book, a book written by the hands of Mitch, but taken from the words of Morrie, the true author.

Tuesday with Morrie is a book not about the beginning. Nor is it about the end. It is about the process. In many ways, Mitch represents us all, trapped in the tempest of materialism. And, Morrie? Morrie is love. He is the lifeline for humanity. Through his dying, he has shown us how to live. With respect. With optimism. And ultimately, with love. His lesson will forever reverberate in the hearts of his students.

And I am proud to be one of them.

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