THURSDAYS WITH MORRIE: THE USE OF CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE IN A DEATH AND DYING COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Educating college students about death and dying can be a difficult task when their experiences have been limited to trivial encounters through television and movies. The use of a book such as Tuesdays with Morrie (Albom, 1997) in a course on death and dying offers both college age traditional and older non-traditional students an opportunity to become acquainted with the dying process and to confront contemporary issues such as the September 11th tragedy in a non-threatening manner. This article describes the method in which this book has been incorporated into a death and dying course, a sampling of questions used with a class project and an overview of the adjustments made since its inception as a required reading.

INTRODUCTION

While reading the book Tuesdays with Morrie (Albom, 1997) is of benefit to those with a casual interest in learning more about dying, the use of this nonfiction literary work in conjunction with a structured death and dying class project has implications for allowing undergraduate students the opportunity to confront contemporary issues of death (Corr et al., 1992) with a figure that offers a sense of familiarity and comfort (Wolf, 1987). Using such a tool is particularly beneficial to those learners who have not yet experienced the death of a relative first-hand and are lacking an intimate foundation for further exploration of the dying process (Mahon, Goldberg, & Washington, 1999).
BACKGROUND

When Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote *On Death and Dying* in 1969, she offered both the academic and non-academic world an opportunity to become reacquainted with the dying. While criticisms of her work have been just as numerous as the praise she has received (Corr, 1993), Kübler-Ross provided a glimpse into the life of the dying. That which was so natural, yet seemingly distant, could finally be approached under the guise of scholarship. Given the genesis of her research, in responding to the call of theology students wanting to know more about the dying, and the crises they faced (Kübler-Ross, 1969), the compatibility of this book with a course addressing issues of death and dying seemed both fitting and natural.

As the care provided to the dying has matured over the past 30 years with the establishment of the hospice movement, as well as Right-to-Die societies, it was inevitable that a new wave of writings would be needed to explain the process of dying to generations unfamiliar with this seemingly “unnatural act.” For persons reared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the loss of family members throughout one’s life cycle might have been expected, as parents, grandparents, and even siblings succumbed to diseases and illnesses that have more recently been controlled. However, for their children, those representing the current student body of college age undergraduates across the country, the opportunity to personally encounter death has become increasingly distant, as their parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents live longer and healthier lives (Minino & Smith, 2001).

The living and dying of Morrie Schwartz, a former professor of sociology at Brandeis University, entered the arena of books describing the end of life at a time when such knowledge about the dying process was of mild interest to the casual reader. Evidence that *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) made an indelible impression upon the popular culture is established by its presence on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List for over 200 weeks (Best Sellers, 2001). This, combined with the production and airing of a made-for-television movie featuring the late Jack Lemmon (Jackson, 1999), suggests the appeal of Morrie to a variety of audiences in describing the challenges and features of living while dying.

METHOD

For several semesters, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom, 1997) has been on the required reading list for students enrolled in an undergraduate course in death and dying at a Midwestern university. Prior to being a required reading, an occasional “Tuesday” from the book was shared with students as it related to topics about caring for the dying and understanding the needs of the dying. For example, “The Fourth Tuesday” with its focus on preparing for death, helped facilitate classroom discussion on what it means to face personal mortality. While the “Fourteenth Tuesday,” with its emphasis on saying goodbye, served a different purpose in
reminding students that not all stories end happily with a person going into remission and thus avoiding death. Rather, dying and death are natural processes and need to be acknowledged for what they are—natural events. Despite having acquired knowledge about demographics, disease, and signs of death, it was the story of Morrie and Mitch Albom that helped students observe dying and death in a different manner. Because of student interest and feedback (based on an average of 30 students per course section), *Tuesdays with Morrie* was officially incorporated into the course during the fall semester of 1999.

Discussion of the book does not take place until mid-way through the semester to allow students time to become familiar with the various theories and concepts of death and dying; however, many students express an interest in reading the book at the onset. In addition to reading the book, a special edition of the three Nightline interviews (Just, 1996) between Ted Koppel and Morrie Schwartz is shown in class to provide students with a visual introduction to the discussions that led to Albom’s book. For many, having a visual image of Morrie is helpful in completing the assignment described in this article. Another film, *Living Fully Until Death* (Dartmouth/Princeton Medical Center, 1996), is shown to students highlighting the experiences of three people coping with dying, including Morrie Schwartz. Witnessing Morrie’s disease progress on film offers the students a glimpse into the challenges of the dying. Following the viewing, feedback is solicited from students to gain their impressions and to afford them time to assimilate the interviews. In addition, they are also given time to ask questions about his disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and the dying process in general.

**THE COURSE PROJECT—THURSDAYS WITH MORRIE**

The title of the course project varies from semester to semester depending on the day of the week the class sessions are held. The intent is to afford students a day of their own with Morrie, rather than a continuation of the dialogue found in the book. When the project was first introduced, questions were provided mid-way through the semester. Students commented that they needed more time to contemplate and prepare their responses. In response to this feedback, the list was provided at the beginning of the semester. Included with the course syllabus is a listing of four or five questions that the students “ask” of Morrie as if they were to have met him face-to-face. The purpose of the dialogue is for the students to demonstrate their familiarity with the book and to provide an understanding of the life and beliefs of Morrie Schwartz. In addition to meeting course expectations, the discussion between the student and his or her alter-teacher allows for an exploration of contemporary death-related issues that are oftentimes difficult to explain (Corr et al, 1992). Finally, the project is designed to provide students with a semi-structured format in considering issues of death and dying that may have not been previously explored (e.g., Princess Diana, Andrea Yates—the mother from Texas
convicted of drowning her children, etc.). Committing thought to paper seems to be of value to students who take this course.

Evaluation of student responses consists of a review of three elements. First, their understanding of Morrie's life as described in the book and videos, his position on such issues as physician-assisted suicide (PAS), the afterlife, and his approach to people in general is required. While students provide unique and thought-provoking insights into the life of Morrie Schwartz, there is generally some consensus in the way Morrie is described by each student. For the occasional student who neglects to read the book or view the Koppel interviews, problems mount when responding to questions requiring more than a superficial appreciation of Morrie's views on such topics as PAS or life after death. Second, to adequately respond to each question, students need to be familiar with the circumstances and outcomes surrounding each topical event and demonstrate this by their responses. To ensure accuracy and clarity, the instructor evaluates their descriptions based on evidence found in the public domain such as newspaper and magazine articles. The third component of the evaluation requires students to provide personal impressions of Morrie and his responses to the issues being examined. Failure to meet any of these criteria results in a reduction of points for the question and the final point total for the project.

To maintain the integrity of the assignment from semester to semester, new questions are supplied at the start of each term. The current events selected for the fall 2001 semester consisted of the following: What would Morrie's reaction be to Andrea Yates, her husband, and her family? How would Morrie respond to the shootings at Columbine High and the deaths of so many, including the two boys responsible for the event? What would Morrie say to Jack Kevorkian about physician-assisted suicide? If given the opportunity, what would Morrie have said to Timothy McVeigh before his execution? Other questions from previous semesters have included Morrie's reaction to the death of Princess Diana and guidance on how to talk to children and adolescents about death.

At the start of the Fall 2001 semester, the final question was intentionally left open in an effort to incorporate a newsworthy event for consideration. This flexibility allowed for a question to be asked of Morrie relative to the terrorist attacks of September 11 on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Two sections of this course (a day and an evening section) received the same assignment for the 2001 Fall semester. Due to the recent and emotional nature of the event, both sections were given the opportunity to submit their own suggestions for a final question. Encouraging students to participate in the creation of activities and projects for a death and dying class has been found to be a useful exercise by other educators and their students as well (Heuser, 1995), and dealing with the September 11 tragedy seemed to be a fitting exercise.

While various questions were suggested, both day and evening sections of the course presented an intriguing question that warranted further inspection.
The final question for the day section was: "If you were on one of the planes that crashed in New York, Washington, or Pennsylvania, what would you have said to the other passengers to comfort them, given your recent dealings with death and dying?" The evening section asked a similar question. "Morrie, had you been able to communicate with the passengers of the four hijacked planes, what might you have said to help ease the minds of those who knew they were about to die?" Because of the minimal attention that has been given to passengers aboard these planes, coupled with the potential for students to be flying in the near future, the chance to discuss this with Morrie was perceived to be worthwhile.

Students are required to submit a pre-determined number of pages for each response. The style of the dialogue varies by students, ranging from a highly structured format to a loosely woven conversation between themselves and Morrie. At the end of each dialogue, students are then asked to give their opinion of Morrie's response. Inclusion of the student's opinion was added to the project following feedback from students who expressed a desire to offer their own impressions of the specific event and Morrie's response. This adjustment was made for the Fall 2001 semester and has developed into an interesting exploration of their feelings about a given situation. This difference of opinion was particularly pronounced with respect to the Andrea Yates case and to their perceptions of Morrie's response to the passengers on one of the four downed flights on September 11.

Regarding Andrea Yates, the students' impression of Morrie's reaction consisted of forgiveness and compassion for all involved. Unlike Morrie, a number of students were not interested in showing any forgiveness to Andrea Yates or her husband for the killing of their five children. For many, it was difficult to understand why a mother would end the lives of her children.

With respect to Morrie's response to the passengers on one of the doomed planes of September 11, while some had hoped Morrie could be on the plane with them providing comfort, others were not so receptive to his presence and compassion. Specifically, several students indicated that while they were fond of Morrie, they would not want him to get in the way of their attempts to thwart the activities of a group of terrorists. To them, talk of love and compassion was secondary to their primary concern of aborting an attack. Perhaps in responding in such a manner, students were able to capture some semblance of control over an uncontrollable situation, particularly as the terrorist attacks had taken place only a month earlier when this assignment was completed. As such, one can only speculate as to whether or not they would actually engage in these behaviors if faced with a terrorist threat.

Interestingly, for those who wanted to have Morrie present on the plane, their comments highlighted his tendency to embrace love and the search for meaning in life. For one student, it was evident that Morrie would emphasize the value of memories, as these are what define a person's life and the relationship
one makes with others. A person, lost to the events of a terrorist attack, would not be forgotten, but would be remembered because of the memories left behind.

On the day the assignment is due, all or a portion of the class period is devoted to discussing the book and to soliciting feedback from the students regarding their impressions of Morrie, the book, and their responses to each item. Each student comes with his or her own feelings about Morrie. Generally speaking, students seem to find some sort of connection with this man they have met through print and video. They also gain an appreciation of the different opinions held by their peers. Not all would want to take down a group of hijackers, or chastise Andrea Yates for her actions, but most would benefit from having someone like Morrie offering his thoughts about the situation at hand. Asking a student to consider his or her opinion about a given subject requires more thought and commitment than confining one’s comments to the perceived thoughts of a man who was no longer living. Indeed, one of the benefits of this project is that it demands students to take a position on a given topic or issue by offering their own impressions and opinions. How they would react to a group of terrorists and how Morrie would act in response to this same group may result in two very different scenarios. In stating these differences, students become aware that there is more than one side to an issue or topic. Moreover, this project affords students the opportunity to reflect, react, and relate to the dying beyond the offerings of a traditional lecture or thanatology text.

Based on anonymous student evaluations, reactions to the project have tended to be favorable. A sampling of the comments from the Spring 2001 semester included: “Tuesdays with Morrie was an excellent read.” “Morrie’s story and the assignment associated with him was an exercise in stretching myself.” “I liked the book Tuesdays with Morrie and I’m glad it was assigned because I wouldn’t have read it otherwise.” In addition, as described earlier in this article, “Reading Tuesdays with Morrie was good, but maybe you could find a way to allow for more of an incorporation of the students’ opinions, not necessarily just Morrie’s for the paper. I know I would have more enjoyed thinking about my own views on the issue as opposed to Morrie’s.” Evaluations for the fall semester echoed a similar sentiment as to the value of the exercise. One student commented, “I enjoyed reading Tuesdays with Morrie and thought the paper provoked good thought and insight into our own beliefs about death.” Others remarked that it was a helpful resource in learning about death and dying. A few students have indicated they did not enjoy reading the book. However, the majority, an average of 30 students per section, would like to see the book used in future classes. Their appraisal seems to be more than simply self-serving, as many said they would not sell the book back at the end of the semester, but intended to share it with others. In addition to the course evaluations, students have expressed an interest in learning more about Morrie’s life and his family that would include their thoughts both before and after Morrie’s death.
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE COURSE ACTIVITIES

As future events unfold, other more timely questions will be incorporated into the project. In addressing such concerns, this project serves to fulfill one of the goals of death, dying, and bereavement education (Corr et al., 1992) by giving students the opportunity to explore issues related to current events. Facing the tragedy of the attack on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the downing of United Flight Number 93 was challenging for many of the students, as they were unfamiliar with the concept of terrorism and the effects of war. Being able to discuss this event with an unbiased and neutral figure like Morrie Schwartz offers a certain cathartic appeal. The value of working through the challenges of living can prove to be beneficial for later in life. As educators within the field of thanatology, there is a responsibility to provide students with the necessary tools to enable their success in the future, as well as to confront seemingly uncontrollable circumstances. The use of Tuesdays with Morrie in conjunction with a dialogue allows this to occur. As Morrie suggested in his book, Letting Go: Morrie’s reflections on living while dying (1996):

All the work you have actively done on yourself—all the experiences you have had in your life—can be used to maintain your composure. You have these resources. Draw on them (p. 58).

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REFERENCES


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