

The First Tuesday We Talk About the World

Connie opened the door and let me in. Morrie was in his wheelchair by the kitchen table, wearing a loose cotton shirt and even looser black sweatpants. They were loose because his legs had atrophied beyond normal clothing size—you could get two hands around his thighs and have your fingers touch. Had he been able to stand, he'd have been no more than five feet tall, and he'd probably have fit into a sixth grader's jeans.

"I got you something," I announced, holding up a brown paper bag. I had stopped on my way from the airport at a nearby supermarket and purchased some turkey, potato salad, macaroni salad, and bagels. I knew there was plenty of food at the house, but I wanted to contribute something. I was so powerless to help Morrie otherwise. And I remembered his fondness for eating.

"Ah, so much food!" he sang. "Well. Now you have to eat it with me."

We sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by wicker chairs. This time, without the need to make up sixteen years of information, we slid quickly into the familiar waters of our old college dialogue, Morrie asking questions, listening to my replies, stopping like a chef to sprinkle in something I'd forgotten or hadn't realized. He asked about the newspaper strike, and true to form, he couldn't understand why both sides didn't simply communicate with each other and solve their problems. I told him not everyone was as smart as he was.

Occasionally, he had to stop to use the bathroom, a process that took some time. Connie would wheel him to the toilet, then lift him from the chair and support him as he urinated into the beaker. Each time he came back, he looked tired.

"Do you remember when I told Ted Koppel that pretty soon someone was gonna have to wipe my ass?" he said.

I laughed. You don't forget a moment like that. "Well, I think that day is coming. That one bothers me."

Why?

"Because it's the ultimate sign of dependency. Someone wiping your bottom. But I'm working on it. I'm trying to enjoy the process."

Enjoy it?

"Yes. After all, I get to be a baby one more time." That's a unique way of looking at it.

"Well, I have to look at life uniquely now. Let's face it. I can't go shopping, I can't take care of the bank accounts, I can't take out the garbage. But I can sit here with my dwindling days and look at what I think is important in life. I have both the time—and the reason—to do that."

So, I said, in a reflexively cynical response, I guess the key to finding the meaning of life is to stop taking out the garbage?

He laughed, and I was relieved that he did.

As Connie took the plates away, I noticed a stack of newspapers that had obviously been read before I got there.

You bother keeping up with the news, I asked? "Yes," Morrie said. "Do you think that's strange? Do you think because I'm dying, I shouldn't care what happens in this world?"

Maybe.

He sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I shouldn't care. After all, I won't be around to see how it all turns out."

"But it's hard to explain, Mitch. Now that I'm suffering, I feel closer to people who suffer than I ever did before. The other night, on TV, I saw people in Bosnia running across the street, getting fired upon, killed, innocent victims ... and I just started to cry. I feel their anguish as if it were my own. I don't know any of these people. But—how can I put this?—I'm almost ... drawn to them."

His eyes got moist, and I tried to change the subject, but he dabbed his face and waved me off.

"I cry all the time now," he said. "Never mind."

Amazing, I thought. I worked in the news business. I covered stories where people died. I interviewed grieving family members. I even attended the funerals. I never cried. Morrie, for the suffering of people half a world away, was weeping. *Is this what comes at the end*, I wondered? Maybe death is the great equalizer, the one big thing that can finally make strangers shed a tear for one another.

Morrie honked loudly into the tissue. "This is okay with you, isn't it? Men crying?"

Sure, I said, too quickly.

He grinned. "Ah, Mitch, I'm gonna loosen you up. One day, I'm gonna show you it's okay to cry."

Yeah, yeah, I said. "Yeah, yeah," he said.

We laughed because he used to say the same thing nearly twenty years earlier. Mostly on Tuesdays. In fact, Tuesday had always been our day together. Most of my courses with Morrie were on Tuesdays, he had office hours on Tuesdays, and when I wrote my senior thesis—which was pretty much Morrie's suggestion, right from the start—it was on Tuesdays that we sat together, by his desk, or in the cafeteria, or on the steps of Pearlman Hall, going over the work.

So it seemed only fitting that we were back together on a Tuesday, here in the house with the Japanese maple out front. As I readied to go, I mentioned this to Morrie.

"We're Tuesday people," he said. Tuesday people, I repeated.

Morrie smiled.

"Mitch, you asked about caring for people I don't even know. But can I tell you the thing I'm learning most with this disease?"

What's that?

"The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Let it come in. We think we don't deserve love, we think if we let it in we'll become too soft. But a wise man named Levine said it right. He said, 'Love is the only rational act.'"

He repeated it carefully, pausing for effect. "'Love is the only rational act.'"

I nodded, like a good student, and he exhaled weakly. I leaned over to give him a hug. And then, although it is not really like me, I kissed him on the cheek. I felt his weakened hands on my arms, the thin stubble of his whiskers brushing my face.

"So you'll come back next Tuesday?" he whispered.