

“Don’t cling to things, because everything is impermanent.” – Morrie Schwartz says to Mitch Albom in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. For those of you who never read the book, saw the movie of the same name or saw Ted Kopple’s interviews, Morrie is diagnosed with ALS, an insidious disease, eating away at his body, while leaving his brain, as thoughtful as ever. Morrie invites Mitch to chronicle his process of dying and deliver his message of family, love and forgiveness to the world. Mitch says in the conclusion of his book “...if Professor Schwartz taught me anything at all, it was this: there is no such thing as ‘too late’ in life. He was changing until the day he said good-bye.”

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A very Buddhist aphorism on change.

Thich Nhat Hahn says:

We’re often sad and suffer a lot when things change. But change and impermanence have a positive side. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible. Life itself is possible. If a grain of corn is not impermanent it can never be transformed into a stalk of corn. If the stalk were not impermanent it could never provide us with the ear of corn we eat. If your daughter is not impermanent she cannot grow up to become a woman. Then your grandchildren would never manifest. So instead of complaining about impermanence we should say “Warm welcome and long live impermanence”.

Morrie will live on long beyond the last date on his tombstone because of Mitch Albom, Ted Kopple and the movie about him you can see on YouTube but eventually 100 years from now, or 200 years or 2000 years his story, his message is likely to be forgotten.

In *have a little faith* Albom asks Rabbi Albert Lewis, often referred to as The Reb – What do people fear most about death?

“Fear?”

The Reb thought for a moment. “Well, for one thing, what happens next? Where do we go? Is it what we imagined?”

That’s big

“Yes. But there’s something else.”

What else?

The Reb leaned forward. “Being forgotten.” He whispered.

Albom remarked – There is a cemetery not far from my house, with graves that date back to the nineteenth century. I have never seen anyone come there to lay a flower....

The Reb reflected and then quoted a poem by Thomas Hardy about “a man among tombstones, conversing with the dead below. The recently buried souls lamented the older souls that had already slid from memory.” Hardy called it *The Second Death*.

A second death comes to those people unwanted, unvisited, some in nursing homes, others relegated to the back room of a house or in an isolated bunk in a homeless shelter. Their time left on earth – is short. With most memories gone –the nearly forgotten, await the inevitable.

Maybe, if lucky, their stories will be remembered and told again the next Thanksgiving. But their time – in our individual and collective memories – is limited. Thomas Hardy might have envisioned a different death for those with Alzheimer's or dementia whose plaque filled memories betray them, and us, leaving a living, empty shell to love, care for and release.

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- Who among us hasn't forgotten a friend or relative who moved away? Their Christmas newsletter – last year's travelogue – unsigned and stuffed, in a Merry Xmas card – stopped coming. How long before we scratch their name off our own newsletter-travelogue list?
- More to the point who among us hasn't drifted away, or otherwise stopped writing, calling, texting a friend or relative?

I was searching my cell phone address list for a friend's phone number the other day. It wasn't there and their land-line phone had long ago been disconnected. Ironically, I found names and numbers whose faces I couldn't recall. I had no idea who they were or what the relationship was. Had I had accidentally unfriended them from my memory or just____(Stop – look around)___Blanked?

In today's world it's too easy to accidentally or deliberately unfriend a person and let the relationship disappear into virtual mist.

Albom writes: “It's as if we are screaming Notice Me! Remember Me! Yet the notoriety barely lasts. Names quickly blur and in time are forgotten.”

Virtual impermanence.

Sometimes a relative or friend is ill for a long time before he or she dies, like Morrie Schwartz. Families can help with the transition to the next stage whatever they believe it to be. If we remember and share: their names, their deeds, their laughter and their tears, then they will have escaped a second death – for a generation or two. Remember the time they taught us how to tie our shoes, bake a cake, or throw a baseball. Remember the time they laughed when we swamped their brand new canoe and watched their white Styrofoam cooler float down the river. Life is a series of memories creating stories that make connection and strengthen relationships. It is imperfect, though, and thus over time impermanence reigns.

When the chimes ring – our time is limited and our impermanent memories float away.

- How many generations back can you remember names and stories? Without names and stories, connection disintegrates – impermanence remains.

The first week in June this year, we traveled to Long Beach WA and I took Alбом's book *have a little faith* with me to read and ponder. One afternoon I went for a walk on the beach. Near the beach entrance, I saw 5 crows and a seagull feeding on something. When I approached, the birds flew away and I saw a carcass.

Alбом's thoughts on the impermanence of life came to mind. The carcass, the multi-colored clam and crab shells, the sand infused seagull feathers and yellow foam littered the beach near the tide line separating the dry and wet sand. As I walked toward the water, I crossed the tide-soaked sandy beach filled with small tidal pools and multiple rivulets. Each stream slid slowly toward the sea or waited for the next wave to help return it to its source.

As I walked near the waxing and waning waves I noticed footprints in the sand between me and the water. They would go on for a few yards then disappear, washed away by one of the larger waves that creep up the sloping sandy beach toward the grass covered dunes 50 yards away. I realized my footprints too would be washed away with the next high tide or the next large sneaker wave. The sandaled footprints in the dry sand, only 15 yards away were not as distinct as mine. They were deeper and the sides tended to fall into the imprint. It would take a very high tide, a raging wind storm, or maybe just other walkers on the beach to erase these dry sand footprints left behind.

My beach stroll seemed an apt metaphor for the impermanence of life. Many of you, like me, have stood barefoot in the ocean, deep enough to have the undertow shift sand under and around our feet. Once we step back, the holes, left by our feet in the sand, are immediately filled in. It's as if we were never there or only there for the briefest moment. I walked up the beach from the baby waves, through the wet sand, on to the dry sand and eventually stopped on top of a grass covered dune. As I looked out to the ocean, I realized time is the only factor involved in determining how long our imprint on life will last. As one moves from birth to adolescence, through to adulthood and finally into the twilight years, we face certain change. Our imprint on life will be washed away with the next high tide, blown away by the next storm or simply overgrown by nature – this erasure comes more quickly in some stages than others.

Impermanence is change and change is the only thing in life we can count on.

What about those people we know made a difference in our world – those whose footprints in the sand caused change in this world if only for the briefest moment – the one good act of kindness, done with humility, out of their heart.

- Who comes to mind, that you know, who has made a difference in this world?

For me, Rocci – our fellow congregant for several years, comes to mind. Of course Abraham Lincoln and Mitch Albom have touched many, many lives. And, of course, our families, no doubt, have stories worth remembering.

In the books, by Albom, that I read, I hear a theme that extols the importance of relationship and family. He writes that we are too busy to develop relationships. I believe we've all been too busy at some point in time. I know I have. I spent way too many hours working in the theatre and in Academia striving to honor my title. I chose to work 16 hour days buying into the demands of the production and class preparation. It didn't help that I was striving to make opening night and the next morning's class – perfect. Each class, each production had its own energy, its own demands, its own rewards. One never knows which of our deeds or words will make a difference to someone we meet even for the briefest time – someone who's footprint in the sand parallels ours for ten or twenty steps, then disappears into the foam and is washed back to ocean source.

“Don't cling to things, because everything is impermanent.”

One day last month in Fred Meyer, I met a former student who told me how influential I was in her life. Ten or so years ago she took a class from me at Wenatchee Valley College. The first day of class really connected with her and she still, today, uses the essence of that presentation. I remembered the situation. It was one of my attempts to teach outside the lines. I never knew if I had reached anyone in class or whether they just thought I was weird. She was genuinely grateful for this learning experience. For this one student, this one time – I made a connection, a memory.

Morrie, in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the Reb, in *Have a Little Faith*, and Eddie, in the *Five People You Meet in Heaven*, all died. But their deaths are not sad, not a death to be mourned. They each have found peace and left a legacy of right living, right loving, right relationships. As we wrap our hands around a rose and carefully smell its sweetness, we can also accept its impermanence. So too can we wrap our hands around our loved ones – feel the love – and accept their impermanence.

“I heard a nice little story the other day”, Morrie says. He closes his eyes for moment and Mitch waits.

Okay. The story is about a little wave, bobbing along in the ocean, having a grand old time. He’s enjoying the wind and fresh air – until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore.

“My God, this is terrible,’ the wave says. ‘Look what’s going to happen to me!

“Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave, looking grim, and says to him, ‘Why do you look so sad?’”

“The first wave says, ‘You don’t understand! We’re all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn’t that terrible?

“The second wave says, ‘No, you don’t understand. You’re not a wave; you’re part of the ocean.’ ”

Mitch smiles. Morrie closes his eyes again.

“Part of the ocean,” he says, “part of the ocean.” And Mitch watches him breathe, in and out... in and out... in and out.