Morrie: In His Own Words Study Guide

Morrie: In His Own Words by Morrie Schwartz

Contents

Plot Summary

Morris "Morrie" Schwartz (1916-1995) was a professor of sociology at Brandeis University from 1959 until his retirement following getting his Ph.D at the University of Chicago. During that time, he studied the sociology of sickness, death and grief, his interest in which had been spurred by his mother's death when he was a child. In 1994, Schwartz was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. Towards the very end of his life, ABC News Anchor Ted Koppel interviewed him several times about his illness for the ABC news program Nightline. When the interviews were aired, many of Schwartz's friends and former students reestablished contact with him. One of them, Mitch Albom, helped him write the book, Tuesdays with Morrie, before Schwartz died. In 1999 it became a popular movie.

Around the same time, Schwartz composed a number of aphorisms that combined his wisdom as a teacher of sociology and as someone with a terminal illness. When he shared the aphorisms with friends, they encouraged him to circulate them further. This circulation resulted in the present book, Morrie: In His Own Words. The book is a series of aphorisms about how to cope with a terminal illness socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually. The book is divided into two parts, 'Understanding Where You Are Now' and 'Getting to Where You Want to Be'. The former part focuses on helping his readers (not merely those with terminal illnesses) to cope with their current life situation. The latter part focuses on helping his readers to look forward and to not be afraid to develop as a person despite the approach of death.

Part I has five chapters. Chapter 1 explains what it is like to live with physical limitations and how to struggle with the actual day-to-day physical deterioration. Chapter 2 explains how to handle frustration. Chapter 3 encourages the reader to grieve for her losses and Chapter 4 encourages her to reach acceptance about all the conflicts in one's life, including those beyond her illness. Chapter 5 advises the reader to review her life as a whole and that illness is often a good time to do this.

Part II contains six chapters. Chapter 6 asks the sick reader to stay actively involved with life through community activities, reading, talking to people or at least interacting with them. Chapter 7 recommends keeping one's relationships with others as alive and warm as possible and Chapter 8 recommends doing the same for how the sick person treats herself. Chapter 9 helps the reader to deal with her mind and emotions, to exercise control so as not to lose hope. Chapter 10 asks the reader to develop some sort of spiritual connection as she approaches death. The final chapter, Chapter 11, advocates reconsidering one's conception of death and seeing it as more continuous with life than members of modern Western societies typically do.

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 1, Living with Physical Limitations

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 1, Living with Physical Limitations Summary and Analysis

Morrie Schwartz was a social psychology professor at Brandeis University for four decades who focused on the psychology of mourning, loss and infirmity. When he received his diagnosis of ALS, he began to document his declining health, often in the form of advice to those who suffered along with him. Chapter 1, Living with Physical Limitations, advises the reader to first recognize that the lessening or loss of physical power will always seem to come on too soon. Preparing for it can make it easier. Morrie watched his nerves deteriorate slowly. Losing his ability to swallow and speak was the most surprising as he could never have imagined it before, always being forced to talk. Second, it is vital to accept yourself, your condition and your fate only as they currently exist. We often think that we are somehow owed bodily health and are destroyed when we do not receive it but we must recognize our vulnerabilities.

Third, the reader should understand that it is simply going to be harder and will take longer to do even the most basic things. It is crucial that one do things differently as they did before and to be ready for it. Schwarz had to learn to restraint his natural impulsiveness as it could cause him to fall. Losing the loss of mobility has been extremely difficult. Fourth, you must never be afraid to ask for help or to get as much as you can whenever you need it. Men in particular refuse help that they really need; it makes more sense to be clear and open about your needs. Finally, try not to be preoccupied with your body because your body is only part of your whole self. You are much more than that but your personality can be swallowed up by your illness if you let it.

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 2, Handling Frustration

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 2, Handling Frustration Summary and Analysis

The most constant feeling one has when in declining health is frustration. Things will be hard to access and reach. You must resist getting frustrated or mad; and if you do, let it pass. Frustration results from being unable to act on an impulse to achieve an objective. But by relaxing and letting one's self be open to achievement coming later than one expected, this feeling can be handled. Second, one must expect that stressful situations will occur as one's illness gets worse and 'acts up'. It is important to recognize that these events will also come and that one should expect certain emotional patterns to be associated with them. It is also crucial to learn to manage them. The very best way to avoid letting one's emotions get out of control is to ask for help.

There will be times when you are psychologically vulnerable due to your illness and you will find yourself emotionally, spiritually and behaviorally regressing. Watch for these periods and do your best to avoid or minimize the regression. Do not manage these periods by keeping your feelings bottled up and be honest with those around you that you are in a bad mood. When you feel angry and frustrated let people know; you do not have to be nice all the time just most of the time. Often complaining can be cathartic; it often makes Morrie feel better. It is also helpful to emote in writing or into a tape recorder. Humor helps enormously. Morrie explains that he was once a vigorous dancer and that before he was diagnosed with ALS he lost his ability to dance when he developed asthma. He decided to see a psychiatrist for several months in order to cope with how he felt and it helped him a great deal. Today he cannot dance when he hears dance music but he is able to enjoy it.

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 3, Grieving for Your Losses

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 3, Grieving for Your Losses Summary and Analysis

Many have difficulty with the concept of grieving for one's self but it is just as important as grieving for anyone else when you experience loss. Grieve and mourn for yourself and let yourself do it over and over again. Grieving is a form of release and can help you feel comforted. It can also help you feel composed. Grief is a natural emotion that is best to express despite cultural reservations to the contrary. It does not end with a single outpour. Grief will come back again and again. Morrie sees grief as a way of giving life respect. We respect the dead with grief and so we can do the same for ourselves.

There are many ways to express loss. Crying works for Morrie. He realized this in a therapy workshop years ago. The leader of the group had people reenact important scenes from their lives and Morrie volunteered to do a scene from his mother's death. The leader then set up the characters and the casket and asked Morrie what he wanted to say to her. Morrie was overwhelmed and screamed out "Why did you leave me?" and then he broke down entirely. He was in his mid-fifties and his mother had died nearly fifty years previous. But Morrie cried for hours, stopping and starting again. He had never cried longer and it helped him transition, changing his attitude towards dealing with his mother's death and death generally. Not only can Morrie now mourn his own death but the sufferings of those close to him and for the injustice and cruelty in the world. After mourning it is easier to face the day; Morrie uses his feelings as a source of strength.

The next few pages are an interlude called 'Tips on Healthy Grieving'. Good grieving and bad grieving can often appear the same. But they are very different. Unresolved guilt can turn good grief into bad grief, as is a lot of anger you resist facing or issues you haven't worked out with the person you are grieving for. Focusing on regret does the same. Morrie encourages family and friends to be open to letting the grieving person cry in front of them and to let them know they'll always be there. Don't hide your grief; don't falsify reality.

After the tips, Morrie argues that the suffering should make an agreement with their family and friends to remind them that when the sufferer that when she is depressed that she does not want to stay that way; instead, the sufferer should ask family and friends in advance for a 'compassionate nudge'. Morrie, for instance, reminded his family to encourage him when he was down and when he was down, a friend told him that when he was in good spirits he said to try and cheer up. This is only way to get

one's self out of depression, that is, reactive depression, depression caused by an event. Finally, when you have grieved for what you have lost, cherish what remains and try to see your life as worthwhile.

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 4, Reaching Acceptance

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 4, Reaching Acceptance Summary and Analysis

In the fourth chapter, Morrie begins by encouraging the sufferer to try and develop a sort of peace that is both spiritual and emotional to help counter physical distress. This begins by accepting the reality of one's condition. Acceptance is often harder than it needs to be, however, since our society is so horrified by death. Further, acceptance also doesn't happen immediately. It is a process. Second, you should realize that you will feel like a child at times and as an adult at others. On the one hand you will one day be completely dependent on others at times but at others you must deal with your difficulties and accept them like an adult. You must also struggle with contradictory feelings, such as wanting to die and wanting to live or loving others and disliking them. Acknowledging your negative feelings for those you love is often an important method of coming to appreciate them and love them for who you are. The hardest opposite to handle is wanting to live and die at the same time; one side will dominate at different times.

Third, Morrie recommends letting one's self run with the fantasy of no longer being sick and being high functioning so long as the fantasy brings pleasure. When it starts to become painful, come back down to earth. Fantasy is often very good. Fourth, you must accept that you will not again be physically comfortable but instead, enjoy when you are comfortable enough.

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 5, Reviewing the Past

Part I, Understanding Where You Are Now, Chapter 5, Reviewing the Past Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5 concerns reviewing the past and handling it while one is ill. Morrie argues that one should accept the past as part, though to not deny or ignore it. It is fine to reminisce but one must struggle not to live in it. Learn from your past but do not regret it. For those caring for a sick relative or friend that you have had a hard relationship with, you must come to terms with your past with that person. Your anger and resentment won't go away just because the person is sick. Relationships are very complex and it is important to get things out in the open. Follow the sick person's initiative however; they will sometimes want to talk and sometimes not. Be careful about how to handle things and take directives. Also: the sufferer must learn to forgive herself and others. She should ask for forgiveness as this can help heal the heart, remove bitterness and abolish guilt.

Many of us are too hard on ourselves for our failures; we should do our best to forgive ourselves for all of that. Negative feelings do little good. Morrie then tells the story of how he regretted being mean to a colleague for twenty years before asking for forgiveness and when he did his colleague was very gracious. It was a load off of his heart. Finally, the work you have done on yourself, your experience, all these things can help you keep things together. You have the power from your life as a whole to survive; rely on it. You can use your past positively. When you are sick you can make a review of your life, make amends, let go of regrets and come to grips with your unresolved relationships.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 6, Maintaining an Active Involvement in Life

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 6, Maintaining an Active Involvement in Life Summary and Analysis

The second half of the book turns to the matter of handling your suffering after understanding your place in life. First and foremost, one must maintain an active involvement in life. Morrie encourages the reader to pursue her interest, focusing on things that matter to her or that concern her. Being passionately involved in your favorite activities helps coping a great deal. But figuring out what activities to be involved in requires knowing who you are. Morrie points out that the sociologist Erving Goffman said that when you remove the social roles away from each person there is no one left, no inner core personality. The deconstructionists say the same thing about the idea that you have an essence. But Morrie disagrees, believing that we have core selves and that the better we know ourselves the better we can be involved in our social world.

Second, please do not let yourself believe that you are useless. This is a sure path to depression. Instead, do your best to find ways to be useful. A great risk of physical infirmity is losing one's sense of purpose, wondering why one should get up in the morning. Set goals for yourself. Morrie has several goals to help give him meaning, including being kind and warm to his friends and reading. Third, it is never too late to get involved in an activity or redirect your interests. Morrie did not expect his life to become as active as it is. Since he starting writing his aphorisms, initially only for his own benefit, he has found that he has the ability to get away from his illness and keep himself together. When he shared them with friends, they wanted him to send them to others, which got a story written about him in the Boston Globe. This led to an interview on Nightline which led one hundred and fifty people to write him personally about how what he said made them feel comforted.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 7, Relating to Others

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 7, Relating to Others Summary and Analysis

No matter how bad it gets, keep your heart open to others whenever possible and to the greatest degree you can muster both for other people but also because it helps you. Do what you can to be generous, decent and welcoming. Since Morrie has had ALS he's made six or seven new friends, those he didn't know before. He's also reestablished old relationships including former students. When you are lonely, know that you can still develop friendships and reconnect with others. Just be kind and approachable.

Wanting to be different is only the beginning. Changing how you behave is hard. Set goals of being cheerful and outgoing when you feel curmudgeonly. If you want people to talk to you more, work to become a better listen. If you want people to visit, make their visits more pleasant. You might feel fake at first, acting in a way uncharacteristic of you but remember that whatever made you a curmudgeon was that you acted like one and when you act like a generous person you will eventually become one. Don't try to change too quickly or you'll get discouraged and people won't notice immediately.

Trying to distinguish between what you want and need. You really do have a basic need to feel connected to others, just as basic as the need for food, water and shelter. As his disease has gotten worse, Morrie has become more dependent. He is wheeled around everywhere; he is fed, bathed and taken to the bathroom. But he still has an independent mind, mature emotions and he uses that independence to keep his core self alive. Relating to others in dependency is difficult. No one ever truly grows up. To be grown up, we have to recognize being a member of a grown-up community. We often lose our sense of community in Western life and we should try to regain it. Further, people need to be needed; it helps others feel like good people. But err on the side of asking help for your needs not merely your wants. But always ask for your needs; Morrie is now very insistent on having his needs met.

Talk about your illness when you can and talk to those who will listen. It helps other people handle their own weaknesses as well as your own. Our culture often treats being unwell as if it were a form of shortcoming. People feel ashamed to be sick and they keep it secret, which hurts everyone because the sick person feels miserable. We must be able to share what's going on inside of us. Do your best to maintain a support system of those who care about you and those you care about. Only make demands of others that they aren't ready to fulfill or you will drive them away. And when they refuse, accept it. You cannot manage your illness without a caregiver for your physical needs but you need a caregiver for your social needs as well. When you're in a state of disrepair having a social network is crucial. There can be a lot of interchange even when you have a great need as others will get something out of their connection with you.

Your friends and family will be inclined to distort their image of how sick you are to make it seem like you are 'better'. They need this because they love you, so accept it but let them know what the current reality is trying not to impose it upon them. Finally, let others' affection and love be enough to keep you composed. Those loving moments will help you feel at peace.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 8, Being Kind to Yourself

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 8, Being Kind to Yourself Summary and Analysis

Relating to others well is important but so is relating to yourself. Treat yourself gently. Be your own friend. Don't put yourself down or criticize yourself all the time. It is easy to feel disgusted with yourself when you are sick but you cannot wallow in that feeling. Treat yourself as a friend would. Being gentle to yourself is a bit like parenting yourself. Next, find ways to maintain a kind of privacy even when it is invaded by external reality. Privacy becomes very valuable when you are sick. There is always someone around when you need help twenty-four hours a day. Do your best to carve out time to be with yourself and communicating with yourself, which is hard to do when others are around.

When you are sick, you can experience more freedom to be who you want to be because you have less to lose. Morrie explains that Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, wrote a book called I and Thou where he tries to portray an ideal relationship with another where both are reciprocally related without losing our individuality. Morrie has tried to follow this out by developing himself, which you can do even in the last year of your life. You really can change who you are despite being dependent on others and being constantly surrounded by them.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 9, Dealing with Your Mind and Emotions

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 9, Dealing with Your Mind and Emotions Summary and Analysis

Retaining a sense of control is essential to surviving one's illness mentally. But since you cannot retain control of your body, retain control over your mind and emotions and increase that degree of control. Increasing emotional control requires understanding why you're doing what you're doing and why you're feeling what you're feeling. You must also develop a sense of 'emotional space' where you can get perspective on your feelings and thoughts and consider alternatives. You can also determine how you respond to an event beyond your immediate first reaction. Morrie has experienced such a change of response for himself.

You must also be a witness to yourself. Watch your physical, emotional, social and spiritual states. We are often absorbed by our emotional experiences, even overwhelmed. When you're sick, you must both participate and observe what is happening to you. Happily for Morrie, his practice analyzing patient-staff interactions helped him develop this idea. He needed to develop a detachment from the process in order to avoid going crazy. But one need not be a professional to develop detachment. Meditation helps as well as does trying to take the perspectives of others. It also helps to write things down, as can prayer.

You should accept some doubts about your capacity to change your emotions. Try anyway, since you may be surprised. We often sell ourselves short of what we're capable of. You will never have complete control, however. Just be persistent. Your feelings will often change with your actions. Finally be hopeful but not foolishly hopeful as you will be disappointed. Courage is very difficult to handle as one must both have hope and energy but not be so dependent as to put yourself at excessive emotional. Courage in the face of physical pain is also very difficult.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 10, Developing a Spiritual Connection

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 10, Developing a Spiritual Connection Summary and Analysis

It is very important for the sufferer to develop a connection with a higher power. While the fundamental questions of life are puzzling, Morrie is sure that some higher power exists. While he was raised Jewish, he eventually became agnostic. While he went to an Orthodox synagogue he felt its teachings were meaningless. He had no sense of holiness, no connection to God. He rejected the faith when Hitler came to power in 1933. The Holocaust made it hard to believe in God. He would hear Hitler on the radio and he would tremble. How could Hitler succeed at killing so many if God existed? Today Morrie finds himself drawn to Jewish mysticism.

Morrie advises the reader to discover what you find divine, holy or sacred and to attend and worship it as you need. Ten years prior to writing the book, Morrie starting to become dissatisfied with agnosticism and decided to start meditating though he is not very good at it. He got into it when he met an Indian philosopher named Kristnamurti in the 1950s. He thought one should question all her presuppositions about life and living. The world is not given to us to perceive directly and even our sense of reality changes over time. Each age creates its own sense of the world. So meditation has helped Morrie feel calm and centered and seeks inner peace, looking to prayer for solace.

The sufferer should look for the answers to eternal questions about life and death; however, one should be prepared not to discover any answers. Instead, enjoy the search. But nonetheless, even by seeking God you already have some kind of spiritual connection. For Morrie, compassion is not enough. He wants to have a spiritual experience. Many claim to have had them and Morrie is open, though he is not frustrated it hasn't happened yet.

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 11, Considering Death

Part II, Getting to Where You Want to Be, Chapter 11, Considering Death Summary and Analysis

The final chapter concerns thoughts of death. Morrie begins by explaining that one should look at life and death as closer than one usually does. It is natural to die; we started to die at birth. We know that we're not something separate from nature. Everything dies and Morrie is working to accept it. He asks the reader to try and reconsider her attitude towards death. He encourages people to be grateful that they have the chance to learn how to die. Dying is both private and communal. Everyone will be affected by your death but ultimately it is you who will die. Dying also helps to bring out the community and love that always surrounded you. Normally our egos get in the way of this. Morrie also encourages us to include a friend or more in our spiritual journey because this makes it less difficult. Some of Morrie's friends and he are members of a death and spirituality group and they struggle with whether there is a soul or afterlife. Morrie doesn't think the answers matter as long as you're getting something out of it. Even without a formal group you can still pursue these questions.

When you get to Morrie's point at the edge of death you realize how absurd it is not to believe in death and how absurd all of our egoism is. Morrie suggests that if you learn how to live you'll know how to die and that if you learn how to die you'll know how to live. The best way to live well is to be prepared to die. Impending death makes your purpose clear and it helps you focus on living an ethical life. Morrie also believes that as a part of humanity, he's going to die but also live on as part of a whole.

Characters

Morrie Schwartz

Morrie Schwartz (1916-1995) is both the author and the main character of Morrie: In His Own Words. Schwartz taught sociology at Brandeis for around thirty-five years where he studied the sociology of grief, suffering and death. He was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease at age 77 and died at age 78. In the meanwhile, he composed a number of his thoughts which became both Morrie: In His Own Words and the book and later movie Tuesdays with Morrie. The movie was inspired by the interviews that Ted Koppel, an ABC news anchor, did with Schwartz in 1995, not too long before Schwartz died.

As author, Schwartz expresses a wise and gentle kindness about the difficult matters of suffering and death. Schwartz encourages people to be less caught up in their egos, to worry less about consuming, fighting, past hurts and to focus on living an ethical life and cultivating close relationships with friends and family. He has clearly endured his suffering with grace and is forthright and honest about his challenges. Schwartz displays both the attitude of a wise, old man and the frustrations and anger of a childish curmudgeon, though he only reveals the latter because his degree of maturity far exceeds that of most humans, including the terminally ill. Schwartz was a teacher for most of his life, so he acts as both a teacher and his own student throughout the book.

The Sick Reader

While 'the sick reader' is not a particular person, it is the other major persona in the book. Morrie: In His Own Words is not exactly a character driven book, nor is it at all a plot-driven book. Instead, it is a series of lessons, a conversation even, between Schwartz and his reader, who is most likely terminally ill as he was when he wrote the book. Schwartz identifies with the sick reader as he shares experiences with them. And while the sick reader never speaks, Schwartz identifies some of her major character traits.

The sick reader will inevitably be fussy and frustrated as she loses physical functioning. What may once have been a happy and chipper personality can turn bitter and curmudgeon-y. The sick reader will also struggle with being kind to friends and family and being embarrassed due to her increased dependence on others. Since the sick reader will spend a lot of time trapped within her own mind, she must avoid wallowing in isolation and depression and must fight being totally absorbed by fantasy, grief and regret. She will also run the risk of losing her personality by losing her bodily functions and may find her sense of self slowly ebbing away.

Morrie encourages the sick reader to fight all of these impulses—to cultivate relationships with friends, to come to accept one's physical limitations, to be willing to

ask for help whenever one needs it and to review one's life and try to wrap up loose ends. He also encourages the sick reader to remain actively involved in life and to teach one's self emotional self-control.

Caretakers

Schwartz encourages the sick to develop good relationships with their caretakers and to strive to be kind to them and to get used to their presence.

Community Members and Family

Schwartz emphasizes the importance of maintaining a support system of community members, friends and family to help cope with illness.

Sigmund Freud

Schwartz disagrees with Freud that God is a father-substitute.

Erving Goffman

Schwartz disagrees with Goffman that we have no core self outside of our social roles.

Ted Koppel

Koppel interviewed Schwartz for Nightline, the response to which helped create Tuesdays with Morrie.

Martin Buber

Schwartz agrees with Martin Buber that a perfect relationship with others balances community ties with individuality.

George Herbert Mead

Schwartz agrees with Mead that we should take the perspective of others in order to feel empathy for them. We can also take their perspective to have empathy for ourselves.

Kristnamurti

An Indian philosopher who Schwartz met in the 50s and who inspired him.

God

Schwartz believes very strong that some sort of being like God exists but claims to know little about such a being.

Objects/Places

ALS/Lou Gehrig's Disease

A nerve disorder where nerves stop transmitting to muscles which causes gradually muscular dystrophy leading to death. Schwartz died of ALS.

Aphorisms

Pithy phrases containing wisdom. Morrie: In His Own words is full of Schwartz's aphorisms, composed to help him and others cope with their illness.

Physical Decline

Schwartz advises the sick reader to learn to accept her physical decline.

Frustration

Frustration will be a constant part of the sick person's life and so it is best to try to manage it when it comes.

Grief

Sometimes grief is necessary for coping with one's illness. Grieving for one's self is particularly important. But grief can sometimes come from poor motives.

Acceptance

Accepting one's place in life is key to inner peace.

Community

Community is essential to effective coping.

Virtue

Illness is a great opportunity to learn how to become more virtuous.

Spirituality

Schwartz encourages his readers to develop a spiritual connection as they understand the term.

Self-Control

Self-control is an important ability in controlling one's mind and emotions during physical decline.

Death

Schwartz advises the reader to reexamine her concept of death.

Themes

Understanding Where You Are Now

The first half of the book is devoted to helping the reader understand where she currently is in terms of her disorder. He divides the book into several lessons. The first lesson is to learn to accept one's physical limitations and the fact that they will worsen as time progresses. Accepting physical limitations is key to avoiding frustration. The second lesson concerns how to handle frustration when it comes. Schwartz advises learning to expect it but control one's reaction to it. The third lesson is to grieve for one's losses. On the one hand, one must grieve for past losses of family and friends to death, estrangement and other factors. But it is most important to grieve for one's self, for one's loss of mobility, loss of connection and forthcoming death.

The fourth lesson is to reach acceptance about one's condition generally. Physical decline is a reality and frustration will become a regular part of life. Grief is going to come one way or another and the best way to handle it is to face it. The final lesson is to review your past. By reviewing one's past, Schwartz means to take an inventory of one's successes and failures, triumphs and regrets and try to heal old wounds and tie up loose ends. Thus, understanding where you are now requires a number of hard lessons but they are necessary to have peace and solace about one's condition.

Getting to Where You Want to Be

The second major theme of Morrie: In His Own Words is how to move forward after accepting where you are now with your illness. After reaching acceptance (and perhaps even before), it is essential to follow six general lessons. The first lesson is to maintain an active involvement in life. Continue to see friends and family, watch movies, go on walks when one can, get out in the community and pursue fulfilling projects. The second lesson is to learn to relate to others more effectively. Be kind and patient; do one's best to improve one's behavior each day. Heal old wounds and try to understand the emotional states of one's caregiver, family members and friends.

The third lesson is to learn to be kind to yourself. When your health is failing it is easy to berate yourself and to feel depressed. Being kind to yourself can help combat this challenge. The fourth lesson is to learn to deal with your mind and emotions. As the sick person's body declines she may feel her identity starting to disappear. It is thus important to cultivate a rich mental and emotional life and to learn to control bad thoughts and feelings when possible. The fifth lesson is to develop a spiritual connection. Schwartz's connection is with a higher power but he advises people to pursue a spiritual connection in their own way. Finally, Schwartz recommends learning to understand death and to reconsider one's conception of death.

Composure

A consistent but less explicit theme of Morrie: In His Own Words is the ideal of composure. Composure is a multi-faceted ideal, however. On the one hand, it means keeping one's self together in the sense of maintaining a good, stable, mature attitude in public and before one's private community. Being composed in this sense means not displaying a sense of internal emotional and spiritual disorder and being outwardly appropriate. A deeper sense of composure derives from keeping one's self together for one's self. For instance, it means handling stress well, having hope and not despairing, coming to manage one's mind and emotions, accepting one's place in life and making peace with death so as not to become overwhelmed.

While Schwartz may not have intended it to be part of his ideal of composure, he often focuses on keeping one's identity or core self composed. He notes that when one loses one's physical sense of control, she can easily lose her identity as her body was so deeply enmeshed with her self-conception. Schwartz affirms the existence of a core self that can be cultivated on an emotional and spiritual level to replace the lost sense of physical self. And so composure works on a number of different levels, at the social level, at the conscious level and at the level of the whole person. All three levels work together to comprise a single ideal.

Style

Perspective

Schwartz's perspective is a combination of wisdom, compassion, empathy and one in such of a spiritual connection. Schwartz clearly conceives of himself as a man whose background in the sociology of suffering and his experience with Lou Gehrig's disease give him an unusual perspective on terminal illness. Thus he spent much of his time when he was in physical decline crafting aphorisms to help others make it through what he was experiencing at the time. These aphorisms are meant to encapsulate lessons that Schwartz explains throughout the book.

The compassion in the book is obvious. Schwartz clearly understands what the sufferer is experiencing and aims to help her find consolation despite her difficulties. He understands the sense of loss, grief, isolation, frustration and hopelessness that accompany having a terminal illness. His eagerness to encourage those who share his struggle displays a desire to help them. His perspective of empathy is closely tied to his compassion as a result since he finds it relatively easy to put himself in the shoes of others who suffer. Schwartz is also a man, often unusual for an academic, who believes in a higher power and is in the process of trying to learn more about it. He encourages others to do the same despite declining to give any hard and firm answers about the subject. Schwartz has also benefitted from a lifetime of learning as displayed in his discussions of Freud, Goffman and Buber.

Tone

The tone of the book is one of wisdom, peace and profundity. It is a short book and the entire structure of each chapter is built around Schwartz's finely crafted aphorisms. One would expect, therefore, a tone appropriate to a spiritual text. Schwartz taught sociology for decades and has developed a fine sense of how human beings cope with grief, illness and death. His background gives an air of authority to his writing. One might otherwise find the book somewhat condescending despite its relatively light touch. But since Schwartz is both an authority on coping with grief and someone in the process of coping with grief the tone loses any hint of condescension and seems instead to be a compilation of finely-tuned and well thought out advice by a wise, old man close to his end.

The tone has a profound weight. With aphorisms like, "Learn how to live and you'll know how to die; learn how to die, and you'll know how to live", the book could not avoid seeming profound. Schwartz's point in writing the book, at least in part, is to help his reader connect the life and death that are so closely tied together in the life of the sick reader. Since Schwartz is discussing matters of life and death, the tone is rather serious despite the fact that Schwartz ably mixes his own form of rabbinic humor frequently into the text.

Structure

Morrie: In His Own Words is divided into two parts and eleven chapters. Each of the chapters is brief and built around three to five aphorisms developed for the subject matter of the chapter. Thus an aphorism will be placed in the text and then a page or two explanation and illustration of the aphorism will follow. Schwartz then transitions to the next aphorism which he connects to the previous one. Ultimately the aphorisms as a whole form the theme of the chapter. The chapters, in turn, form a theme for the two parts.

Working the other way, the two parts are "Understanding Where You Are Now" and "Getting to Where You Want to Be". The first set of chapters help the sick reader to understand what she is going through and what she will be going through along with how to cope with the obviously difficult revelations that must occur in order to accept where one is in life. The chapters that comprise Part II help the sick reader to move forward from understanding where she is to try and continue the process of life achievements despite having a terminal illness. Schwartz encourages the reader to stay active in life and learn how to better relate to others and one's self. He advises the reader to learn to deal with her mental and emotional states and to develop a spiritual connection. He ends by helping readers to reconceptualize their ideas about death.

Quotes

"Am I going to die, or am I going to live?" (Chapter 1, 3)

"Get as much help as you can when you need it." (Chapter 1, 10)

"When you are utterly frustrated or angry, express these feelings. You don't have to be nice all the time—just most of the time." (Chapter 2, 22)

"Grieve and mourn for yourself, not once or twice, but again and again." (Chapter 3, 29)

"I see mourning as a way of paying respect to life." (Chapter 3, 31)

"The most fundamental tension of opposites, I think, is the struggle—especially when you're seriously ill—between wanting to live and wishing to die." (Chapter 4, 48)

"Accept the past as past, without denying it or discarding it. Reminisce about it, but don't live in it. Learn from it, but don't punish yourself about it or continually regret it. Don't get stuck in it." (Chapter 5, 53)

"Take in as much joy as you can whenever and however you can. You may find it in unpredictable places and situations." (Chapter 6, 68)

"No one is ever fully grown-up ... we don't recognize that before we can be completely grown up we have to be a member of a grown-up community." (Chapter 7, 74)

"Now is the time to work on becoming the kind of person you would like to be." (Chapter 8, 94)

"Be hopeful but not foolishly hopeful." (Chapter 9, 106)

"Find what is divine, holy, or sacred for you. Attend to it, worship it, in your own way." (Chapter 10, 111)

"Be grateful that you have been given the time to learn how to die." (Chapter 11, 120)

"Learn how to live and you'll know how to die; learn how to die, and you'll know how to live." (Chapter 11, 125)

Topics for Discussion

How do you think the use of aphorisms aids the message of a book like Morrie: In His Own Words?

How did writing the book help Morrie to cope? How does the project fit in with some part of his advice?

What part of illness does Morrie find the most challenging?

Describe Morrie's philosophy of death as concisely as you can.

Why is community important when one is dying? What about dying makes community easier?

Explain Morrie's position on the existence of a 'real self' and why it matters for his philosophy of death.

Explain Morrie's conception of religion and spirituality and its importance in coping with illness.

What is Morrie's conception of composure? Why is it important?