

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Tuesdays With Morrie: A Humanities Teaching Exercise in Palliative and End-of-life Care

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Talking about death and end-of-life care is too often an uncomfortable and taboo subject for physicians and their patients. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), however, strongly recommends end-of-life training for physicians. The AAFP published *Recommended Core Educational Guidelines for Family Practice Residents in End-of-life Care* in 1998.¹ A comprehensive medical education program of palliative and end-of-life care must address physician comfort level, self-awareness, and communication skills, such as in the American Medical Association's Education for Physicians on End-of-life Care (EPEC) curriculum.² This article describes a humanities-based component of our family medicine end-of-life training cur-

riculum. It facilitates discussions among our learners of issues emphasized by EPEC with sensitivity, enthusiasm, and creativity. The specific teaching tool we use is a book club discussion generated by the reading of the text *Tuesdays With Morrie*.³

Tuesdays With Morrie is a remarkable book with powerful lessons for patients and doctors alike about living and dying. First published in 1997, it quickly jumped to the New York Times Bestseller List for a lengthy stay. The text recounts the intimate conversations between retired professor Morrie Schwartz and a past student, Mitch Albom. Their discussions revolve around Morrie's increasing infirmity and weakness as he approaches death. Morrie has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

For the past 5 years, we have mailed a copy of *Tuesdays With Morrie* to our incoming class of family medicine interns with a

cover letter welcoming them to our program. We instruct them that the book is a gift and ask them to read the text and bring their thoughts, reflections, and impressions to a book club meeting we will hold during orientation. During our approximately 60-minute conversation over lunch, the residents are encouraged to share their reactions and to read aloud from the text those passages that have touched them in some way. As instructors, we allow the discussion to develop its own course and momentum. Our interventions are mostly to underscore consideration of the themes of love, family, and endings and to explore implications of the text for residents' training and work with patients.

We have found our residents to be enthusiastic about sharing their reactions to the book. Many of them bring the books dog-eared and highlighted with passages that they found especially moving or thought-provoking.

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If you hold back on the emotions—if you don't allow yourself to go all the way through them—you can never get to being detached, you're too busy being afraid. You're afraid of the pain, you're afraid of the grief. You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails. (p. 104)³

As long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on—in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here. (p.174)³

The themes raised in our discussion range from an appreciation of Morrie's joy for life to comments on the role of spirituality and religion at the end of life to observations of his striking mindfulness as he faces his impending death (Table 1). Our residents have raised the question of cultural privilege, wondering whether Morrie is especially able to be so mindful, present, and at peace with his death because of his wealth and comfortable socioeconomic level. Additionally, the text opens discussions of hospice care, including the appropriateness of hospice referrals and potential cultural and social barriers to accessing hospice care. We feel that the exercise gives our learners increased comfort with and access to breaking the social taboo of talking about death, even when it is so often at the forefront of patients' and doctors' minds. It provides learners with a personal and collegial opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their own life, consider their humanity, and explore pathways to compassion as a physician.

With great consistency over the years, the discussion moves to a theme we did not initially anticipate as part of the activity objectives. Our residents comment on the juxtaposition of reading a book that

Table 1
Examples of Discussion Themes From *Tuesdays With Morrie*

- Finding joy in life, even in the face of pending mortality
 - Mindfulness and fearlessness in the face of death
 - Privilege, attitudes, and disparities in end-of-life care
 - Spiritual issues at the end of life
 - Roles of family, love, and social support when facing a chronic, debilitating illness
 - Potential benefits of hospice care
 - Physician self-awareness of mortality
 - Personal anecdotes of challenges facing residents as they have discussed death with their patients and/or faced death in their own lives
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inspires them to live life fully just as they begin an intensive residency training program that will severely interfere with life, sleep, and relationships. This provides a forum for dialogue on physician well-being, stress reduction techniques, and support systems. We believe that this activity, held during orientation, sets a precedent for reading literature outside of medicine. It indicates our eagerness to directly, albeit creatively, address the challenges faced by physicians (both personal and professional) in providing excellent end-of-life care. Further, it sets this tone and priority very early in their training.

We always ask our residents about their experience of receiving the book and assignment (Table 2). They have told us of the pleasant surprise of "receiving a gift" in the mail from the place they will soon begin training ("and it was hard-

cover!"). Others have added that they appreciate that we "did not select a book that was fat with small print!" Over the years, several residents have told us that the book had been previously recommended to them, but they never had the time or motivation to actually sit down and read it. Some have commented that they enjoyed the uplifting and "fast-paced reading." Others have told us that it was the first "non-medical text" they had read in several years and appreciated the opportunity and creativity of the assignment. Some are motivated to read other literature that they had been meaning to get to for a while.

Palliative care remains an important and often unrecognized component in medical education and training. Further, it is a challenging topic to teach compassionately and creatively. We have found that, as a teaching tool, a book club discussion of *Tuesdays With Morrie* is

Table 2

Resident Reactions to the *Tuesdays With Morrie* Exercise

- Pleasure and surprise at receiving a book in the mail
 - Appreciation of the creativity of the assignment
 - Increased compassion in working with severely and terminally ill patients
 - Increased awareness of the challenges that physicians and family members have in caring for the terminally ill
 - Eagerness to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with their peer and faculty colleagues
 - Openness to the marriage of art and humanities in medicine
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simple to prepare and facilitate. Moreover, it is a positive and humane way to teach end-of-life care.

Our residents report that the experience of reading and discussing the book has made an important positive impact on their ability to develop compassionate doctor-patient relationships. They also tell us that their parallel reading of the same text is a rich aspect of their bonding as a class. As instructors,

we look forward to our annual book club gathering and encourage you to adopt this learning format with this or other appropriate texts that bring the richness of the humanities to the field of medical education.

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REFERENCES

1. American Academy of Family Physicians. Core educational guidelines for family practice residents in end-of-life care. Leawood, Kan: American Academy of Family Physicians, 1998.
2. American Medical Association. Education for physicians on end-of-life care: trainer's guide. Chicago: American Medical Association, 1999.
3. Albon M. Tuesdays with Morrie. New York: Bantam Doubleday Publishing Group, 1997.

Tuesdays With Morrie study guide contains a biography of Mitch Albom, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. According to Morrie, we should be teaching people how to understand the true meaning of life instead of letting popular culture dictate how we should behave, But the big things are how we think, what we value those you must choose yourself. You can't be asked by Paige S #1132900. Tuesdays With Morrie essays are academic essays for citation. These papers were written primarily by students and provide critical analysis of Tuesdays With Morrie by Mitch Albom. Learning Perspective: The Memoir Genre in "Tuesdays with Morrie". Tuesdays With Morrie Life Lesson. Wikipedia Entries for Tuesdays With Morrie. That was the end of his privacy. In the fall of 1994, Morrie came to the hilly Brandeis campus to teach his final college course. He could have skipped this, of course. The university would have understood. I have been teaching this course for twenty years, and this is the first time I can say there is a risk in taking it, because I have a fatal illness. I may not live to finish the semester. If you feel this is a problem, I understand if you wish to drop the course. He smiled. And that was the end of his secret. ALS is like a lit candle: it melts your nerves and leaves your body a pile of wax. Learn with me. Morrie would walk that final bridge between life and death, and narrate the trip. The fall semester passed quickly. The pills increased. Therapy became a regular routine. Tuesdays with Morrie The setting is late of 1979. A young boy visits with an elderly man every Tuesday to be enlightened on the meaning of life. His name is Mitchell, but friends call him ?Mitch.? The greatest lesson of life is life. Professor Morrie Schwartz is a special teacher, not only is he an instructor, but a mentor and a friend. He is a small elderly man with thin gray hair who dresses casual in old gray sweatshirts. He told his class to execute a trust-fall exercise, in which the students examine each other's trust and reliability by means of doing trust falls; one student will drop directly backwards and has to rely on a different student to grasp them. Not one student has faith in another until one young woman falls with no cringing. Tuesdays With Morrie: a humanities teaching exercise in palliative and end-of-life care. October 2003 Family medicine. Jeffrey M Ring. Hospital care plays a large role in the end of patients' lives in Belgium, especially in the final weeks of life. The result is a high rate of hospital deaths, showing the institutionalised nature of dying. Patients' clinical conditions, the expression of preferences and also healthcare characteristics such as being treated as a palliative care patient, seem to be associated with hospital transfers. It is recommended that hospitalisation decisions are only made after careful consideration. Short admissions in the final days of life should be prevented in order to make dying at home more feasible. Tuesdays With Morrie Summary. Morrie is an extremely lovable college professor who in his late sixties finds out that he is dying. The story of his last few weeks on earth is told by Mitch, one of Morrie's former students, who happens to bump into him during his final days. Those are the bare bones, but now let's elaborate a bit. Mitch Albom is a young guy, just starting his adult life, and Morrie Schwartz, he tells us, is his favorite professor. The feeling seems to be mutual, as Morrie gives Mitch a hug and tearfully says goodbye. Mitch visits Morrie on the first of many Tuesdays. At first he's a bit taken aback by how frail Morrie is and worries that he's made the wrong decision by visiting, but that fear begins to melt pretty quickly.