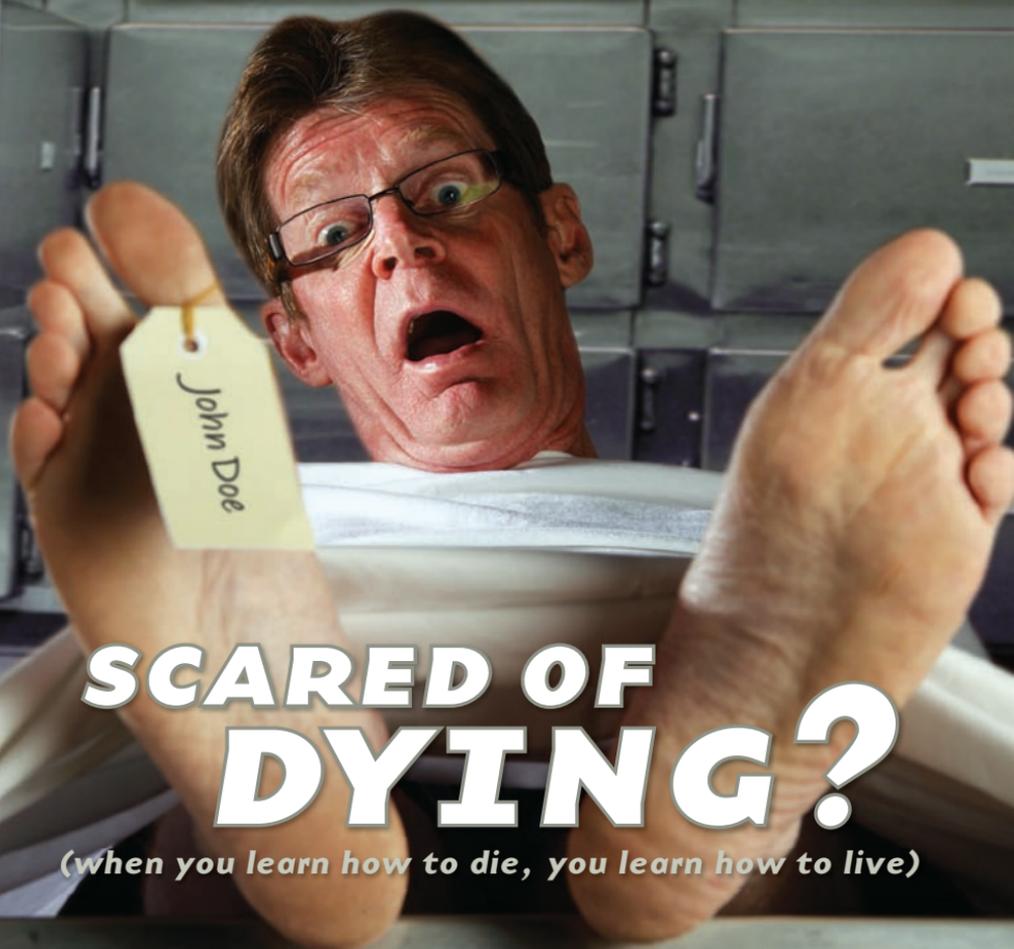


by Paul Freedman & John Cooney



SCARED OF DYING?

(when you learn how to die, you learn how to live)

A CONVERSATION WITH MITCH ALBOM



'*Tuesdays With Morrie*' is an inspiring, much-loved memoir. And if you haven't read the book or seen the movie, you need to. It tells of a dying professor who faces his mortality with great courage and wisdom – and his former pupil, a young journalist whose life has drifted off-the-rails.

The author, Mitch Albom, has just published another, equally powerful memoir – '*Have a Little Faith*' – which records his more recent conversations with two very different people, one of whom was his old Jewish Rabbi: 'the Reb'. Both books are beautiful, deeply-loving, true stories that take us to places we don't often go. And it's hard to encounter their common themes (life and death and meaning) without being profoundly changed. Which is why we jumped at the opportunity to spend an hour with Mitch Albom when he was in New Zealand recently. What difference, we wondered, does faith make? And why are we so scared of dying?

GRAPEVINE: What is it, exactly, that we're frightened of? The physical pain? The fear of being parted from loved ones? The end of everything? Stepping into the great unknown?

MITCH ALBOM: I think people are frightened of *all* those things – which is why they don't want to talk about it.

I was one of those people, by the way.

COUNT ME OUT!

I didn't want to go and sit alongside someone who was dying – that's the last thing a guy in his 30s wants to do! But, really, what do we have more in common than death? I mean, it's the one thing we're all going to share.

GRAPEVINE: Do you think people are scared that if they talk about death they're going to bring it on – like, it might happen before it needs to?

MITCH: I'm not sure. But I know people sometimes feel that way about *visiting* the sick and dying – like it's contagious: *If I go to that hospital I'm gonna somehow walk home with the dying-disease!*

GRAPEVINE: Well, while death may be taboo for most of us, it's the subject your books all seem to deal with.

MITCH: No, I don't agree. They're not all about death. Books about serial killers and murderers, where somebody gets killed every three or four pages – *those* are really about death. In my books, it's true, one person dies ... but my books are

really about *life*. I just use the mirror of death to reflect back on it.

The important question is: *How are we living our lives?* But lots of people won't even think about that unless you point out that they're not going to live forever. When you hold the mirror of death up, you can remind them that time is limited. And then they might open up: "Okay, let's hear what you've got to say about this ..."

Most of us have this delusion of endless sand-in-the-hourglass that kinda keeps us going: "I'm not in the job I really want right now ... but I'll sort it out one day." "I know my relationship's not all it should be ... but I'll fix it soon." "I've been meaning to lose weight ... but I'll start dieting next year."

GRAPEVINE: We know these are things we should do, but we just never quite get around to it – right?

MITCH: Exactly! We're great procrastinators because we have the luxury of self-delusion about how long life goes on. We kid ourselves that we'll do it ... just not today.

Morrie taught me to pretend there's a little bird on my shoulder. And every morning you ask the bird one question, "*Is today the day I die?*"

Of course, most mornings the bird's going to say, "*No, not today.*" But what happens when one morning the bird replies, "*Yes, today's the day!*"? How will you feel? If you've been leading the life you're intended to lead, you might say, "*Well, that's sad news, because I don't want to leave. But I guess I'm ready ...*"

BUT MOST OF US AREN'T ...

Most of us know, deep down inside, that we're not prepared – "No, wait! Give me another week!" Which is why

we avoid talking about death. We just don't want to hear the bird say, "Today's the day!"

GRAPEVINE: That sounds a bit morbid – inviting that bird onto your shoulder. Wouldn't it make you preoccupied with death?

MITCH: I don't think so. Morbid is just a word that people have associated with death because they don't want to think about it.

The truth is, the *more* you think about it, the less morbid it becomes. Something Morrie told me struck very deep: "You learn how to die first ... then you learn how to live."

No, you're not to be fixated on it. But if you lead your life believing things will go on forever, then suddenly get hit with a crippling disease, and all you can say is, "*I didn't do this ...*" "*I should've done that ...*" "*If only I'd done the other ...*" – well, you tell me which is the more morbid?

That's terribly depressing. I *never* want to have to utter those sentences about my life. And one way to avoid that is by recognising: *our time is finite!* Even the luckiest, healthiest guy on earth gets only 100 years – which isn't that long! So what are you going to do with the years you've got?

GRAPEVINE: Other civilisations long before ours – the Egyptians for instance – had a different approach to death and dying. Are there things we can learn from those cultures?

MITCH: Well, that moves into areas of faith and your concept of the afterlife. The Egyptians felt the afterlife was going to be vastly longer than this life, and they'd be able to take everything with them. So



they were constantly preparing, with all their grand accessories.

I don't know if they were right or wrong about the afterlife, because I'm still here! But I think it's an individual thing. If you believe in heaven and the concept of an afterlife in which justice is somehow doled out ... if the good that you do here on earth is rewarded (as many religions believe) ... if the evil that you do here is punished (as many religions teach) ... then you need to take all that into consideration as to how you're leading your life here and now.

But I'm not the kind of person who starts insisting: "Here's what's going to happen when you die!" and drawing all sorts of conclusions. Yes, I did write a novel called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* – but I always remind people it was *fiction*. I didn't actually go!

GRAPEVINE: Your books have been a huge success – and *Tuesdays With Morrie* has become the best-selling memoir in history. Are you surprised?

MITCH: Oh, absolutely! Back at the start, nobody wanted to publish *Tuesdays With Morrie*. They all told me, "No-one will want to read about a dying professor! It's depressing, it's morbid ..."

But then, once the book came out, it just sort of took off.

GRAPEVINE: So maybe the subject isn't that taboo after all?

MITCH: Well, it may be the 'most taboo' – but it's also the subject people are most curious about. For example, after the Rabbi (in *Have a Little Faith*) had died, a tape that he'd left behind was played at his funeral.

GOOD QUESTIONS:

He actually said to the people – in a voice from beyond the grave – "I'm going to tell you the two most-asked questions I've received in my life of 90 years. The first is: 'Is there a God?' ... the second is: 'What happens when we die?'"

Now, of all the questions you could ask of a wise old man – about your career, marriage, happiness, anything – those were the two most popular. And, clearly, what happens when we die is a question people *do* want to hear about it, read about it, know about it – but they want to do it in a way that doesn't frighten them.

In all my books I've tried to take the horror out of dying, and help people reflect on *living* – and *living well*.

GRAPEVINE: Tell us more about *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* ...

MITCH: It's a fairytale, a sort of fable.

Eddie dies and goes to heaven where he meets these five people from his life. And he finds out that there's no such thing as someone who doesn't matter on earth. Everybody's life touches somebody.

And I really believe that. Just by us talking here, you're going to affect me in some way. I'm going to affect you. You'll remember something I've said – and who knows how it'll change the person you meet next? That's what Eddie didn't understand. He thought that, just because he had a simple job, he didn't count.

So maybe my books help people accept the idea that *"When I die, there'll be some people who were deeply affected by my life."* And maybe that takes some of the sting out of death and makes it less horrifying.

GRAPEVINE: You developed a profound friendship with the characters of each of your memoirs. Describe the impact Morrie had on your life?

MITCH: Well, I met him when I was just 17 – on my first day of college. He was that one special teacher, the first adult who took me seriously, didn't treat me like a child, and was willing to listen to what I had to say about personal things. He made a connection at a critical time in my life.

When I saw him again, 16 years later, he was the one who showed me I was going the wrong way. He convinced me I needed to examine where I was heading, the first sort of 'red light' in my life. Since then, lots of people have made me think ... including the Rabbi. But Morrie was the first one I listened to.

He was obviously dying – about the worst death you can imagine, from motor neurone disease. He couldn't move, he needed to be carried to the toilet, he

couldn't scratch his own eye, he couldn't wipe away a tear, he needed you to turn his head so he could just look at you. But he'd lived his life the way he wanted to live it, and he was happy in that. So the fact he was dying didn't fill him with regret – he just accepted it as the natural end of life.

NOW HEAR THIS:

There's something very different about a scene like that. When death is so close, when the person talking to you shows such decay, and that person is saying, "Here's what really matters: listen to me, I'm about to go ..." you listen carefully.

Morrie was staring death right in the face and telling me that the way I was living, my values and goals, were all wrong. The things I thought important didn't really matter. And the things that really do matter, I didn't understand.

He wasn't trying to become some kind of Buddha by saying things that would resonate. He was saying what he was really feeling, from the heart, because life had been stripped down to its bare essentials.

So yes, he affected me profoundly. And he showed me that dying doesn't have to be miserable.

GRAPEVINE: Your latest true story – *Have a Little Faith* – records some equally powerful conversations you had with your old Jewish rabbi, 'the Reb' ...

MITCH: Yes. And that also came in two stages. When I was a kid, he was the personification, I guess, of deity-on-earth. I almost thought of him as "God's secretary" – and if he came anywhere near, I just ran away. As I got to be a teenager, I still felt he was on a totally different level



from me, and I was sure I could never live up to any standards that he set.

When I re-encountered him, he was 82. He'd heard me give a speech about the lessons I'd learned from Morrie. And he came to me and asked if I would do the eulogy at his funeral.

I was thrown by that, because I wasn't very religious. I'd walked away from it as I'd got busy with my life. And here he was, asking me to do a eulogy for the guy who does eulogies!

So I said, "Well, the only way I can do it is if I get to know you as a human being." And that began what I thought would be just a couple of months' worth of meetings – but actually spanned eight years.

GRAPEVINE: And here's when you got what you call your "second education"?

MITCH: That's right. My visits with 'the Reb' came at a time when I'd grown cynical about faith – and *very* cynical about men of faith. We'd been hearing of church scandals, ethnic cleansing, the terrible stuff done in the name of

religion, and I'd come to think it was all a bit of a set up ...y'know? But, suddenly, here I was going into this guy's home and seeing him – not just when he was conducting services, but on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday, at home and in the car.

I discovered that he was deeply true to his word. He was faithful every day of the week. He did his little rituals every day, not just when others were looking, and they gave him great joy. He loved the family emphasis of his religion ... the Sabbath, and the whole idea of just stopping everything and being totally with your family, talking, sharing.

CHANGE-OF-HEART:

To cut a long story short, I went from being a kid who was terrified of him ... to being an adult who didn't trust the business he was in ... to being, finally, someone who deeply admired the business he was in.

GRAPEVINE: What did his life teach you?

MITCH: I think he taught me that faith, when it's purely practiced and truly believed, can bring a very satisfying life. A very comforting one during healthy years ... a very comforting one during tragedy (which he endured, when he lost his daughter) ... and great comfort at the end.

I'd admired the way Morrie had made relationships the essence of his life, so when he died he was comforted by those relationships. But 'the Reb' had an added level: he had a relationship with God, with faith and the universe – which gave him additional comfort in terms of where he felt he was going after his life was over.

GRAPEVINE: One of your books suggests that, when something like a serious or terminal illness hits, there are important conversations we should have with our partners, our children, our ageing parents. But we're inclined to get stuck, aren't we?

MITCH: Yes. And perhaps it's because we haven't thought about it up until that point. It's much better if you can say to someone when you (or they) are healthy, *"Listen, I hope we get 100 more years together – but, just in case we don't, let's talk about what matters ..."*

One of those conversations might be about forgiveness. Whether it's friend-to-friend, child-to-parent, spouse-to-spouse, we often carry issues that we've buried. When you know that someone you love has limited time ... bury the axe! Because if you don't, and that person dies, the issue will never go away.

Kids, for example, know that they've done stuff that's really frustrated or angered or disappointed their parents. But, because their parents have always

been around, they kind of figure: *"There'll be time. I'll make it up to them. I'll get around to it one day."* How much better to clear the air by saying, *"There's something that's always bothered me. I want to get it on the table ..."*

OUT IN THE OPEN:

Don't be afraid to raise stuff like this. You'll be amazed how much more at peace people feel when they get things out in the open. And if you can't think what it is that's causing the block, then ask them ...

"Is there anything I've done that we just haven't talked about? Is there something that's bothered you? I want to address it now ..."

GRAPEVINE: What other conversations should we be having?

MITCH: Do you have people you love? Well, *tell* them! Tell them *frequently*. Tell them *how* you love them. Tell them *why* you love them.

What they're going to remember after you're gone will be ... yeah, the time we went fishing ... that Christmas dinner ... and there'll be a dozen photo-memories that'll jump out. But what they'll cling onto most is the feeling of love and the knowledge of how they were loved.

If you can, explain it to them: *"What I've always loved about you is ..."* or *"I never told you, but when you did this for me it really mattered ..."* Those conversations will last forever.

GRAPEVINE: Morrie decided he'd like to celebrate his own funeral ... *before* he died! Can you tell us about that?

MITCH: Sometimes people with cancer manage to have a good day. They might



do their hair, put on some nice clothes, generally spruce up ... and you can almost be fooled into thinking, “Oh, things aren’t so bad.”

But with Morrie that *never* happened. He was always immobile in a chair. He always looked like he was almost dead. Always lying there, quite still. It was only his eyes and his smile that moved or changed – the rest of him was just a husk.

So, when he had this ‘funeral’, he invited about 25 people. And he gave them all a chance to put together the thoughts that they would’ve said at his funeral.

Now, at his *actual* funeral, fewer people spoke. So, in some ways, this first one was richer, because all 25 got to say something. Some told jokes. Some told stories. Some read poems. Everybody got the chance to participate – and they knew they were talking *to him!*

At real funerals, people often break down and cry. And I suspect it’s because they know they’re talking to someone who’s gone ... who can’t hear them any more. But Morrie was right there in front in us! We could look at him, he could look at us – it was hugely cathartic for everyone.

GRAPEVINE: What difference does a personal faith make when it comes to death and dying?

MITCH: In some cases it makes all the difference in the world. I know a man in Michigan who’s dying. He’s 91. A beloved former sports-commentator, he broadcast for 57 years in the city where I live – so



everybody knows his voice and respects him. And the day he announced that he was dying, the whole city just went into mourning.

It was the top news-story. And when he was interviewed, he seemed very peaceful. The one thing he kept saying was, “I don’t want people to feel bad!”

REASSURING:

I got the chance to talk to him, and I asked, “How come, at this moment, when they’ve given you only weeks to live, you’re so at ease and more concerned with reassuring everybody else?” And his answer: “I know into whose arms I’m going to fall ...”

Now, he’s a Christian. This is what he believes. And the comfort that faith is giving him, here on earth in his dying days,

cannot easily be described just using words. You would've had to sit across from him and see it in his eyes. But it was real, and it was undeniable.

I'd challenge any atheist to say, "Oh, I can talk you out of it!" You couldn't. Nobody could.

Now, I'm not smart enough to know what's on the other side. And I only have my own faith in God – I can't 'produce' God for you right here. But I can attest to the fact that faith gives people, who truly embrace it, a comfort that's unparalleled by anything else ... including even Morrie's approach.

Morrie felt he'd led a good life. He wasn't sure what was going to happen to him next, and he readily admitted: "Maybe this is it." He *hoped* it wasn't. He liked to believe in *something* next. (He even thought he might come back as a gazelle!) But he didn't have any great certainty about that.

But when people deeply believe that they're going to see their loved ones again, that they're going to "see Jesus" or "fall into Jesus' arms" or "enter into the glory of God" – I think it almost makes death a *passage*, rather than an end. It makes it a step towards something they've been waiting for their whole lives.

So, no matter what people *say* about faith, it's undeniable that those who truly have it go to their deaths in a different way from those who do not.

GRAPEVINE: Is death the worst thing that can happen to us?

MITCH: No. I've seen worse. A life of bitterness and anger is worse. A life of cruelty – both *being* cruel, and *enduring* cruelty – can be worse.

Death is not quantifiable or definable by 'good' or 'bad' or 'worse'. It happens to everybody. How could it be 'the worst' when it's simply part of the human condition? It just *is* – like birth.

So unless you feel that death is the end of hope, unless you feel that there's nothing beyond this world, then you have to believe that death is just a part of this universal experience. It may, indeed, be a passage (as many religions believe) to a *better* life – that this is a suffering life here, and the life of grace comes when this one's over.

The true shame isn't that death will come ... but that we *know* this, and yet still choose not to make a good life, a quality life, a meaningful life while we can.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

Even the poorest person can still do good for somebody else. Even the most afflicted can still positively influence others. Morrie was incapable of moving a muscle, towards the end. He was 'useless'. Yet he affected thousands and thousands of people from his chair.

It all comes down to our attitude, and what we choose to do.

To choose to do nothing – to neglect the chance we all have – that's a much more terrible thing than dying. ❁



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