Tuesdays With Morrie: A Primer for Literacy Educators

Thomas Cloer, Jr.

In the last ten years, I have tried to focus on emotion and the importance of affect in the educational process. Tuesdays With Morrie (Albom, 1997) is about the importance of affect and affairs of the heart in educational endeavors. There are many of us in literacy education who believe that the very heart of education is education with a heart (Purkey & Novak, 1984). We realize that learning facts and knowing our discipline are important essentials, but not nearly sufficient to meet the criteria for being a successful literacy teacher.

Introduction

Mitch Albom, the author of Tuesdays With Morrie, like myself, is becoming long in the tooth, and is fully cognizant of that. Mr. Albom never considered that he would have to learn about dying in order to know how to live, but that's really what this book is about. It is about life and death, and coming to grips with things that matter, especially from a teacher's perspective.

The knowledge that one is dying will tend to alter our perspectives, those of us who live in a capitalistic, free-enterprise, Wal-Mart capsule. Morrie, Mitch Albom's favorite college professor, asked Mitch to do one more project with his old professor. The two could study dying together; Morrie could be research, a human textbook. Morrie asked Mitch to study him and watch what happens as one dies, and thereby learn about dying in order to know how to live. "Morrie would walk that final bridge between life and death, and narrate the trip" (Albom, 1997, p. 10).
Morrie very early taught Mitch that greetings and good-byes are very crucial. We as literacy teachers should never overlook their importance. In my fourth decade of teaching, I still consider greetings and good-byes to be some of the most critical things I do as a teacher. Morrie was a hit from the time he asked Mitchell Albom, "Do you prefer Mitch? Or is Mitchell better?" Morrie was thus sending his first invitation to Mitchell, and was confirming it with "I hope that one day you will think of me as your friend" (p. 25).

Mitch Albom reminded me of a Saturday Night Live skit just after Bill Clinton's tawdry sex scandal broke in 1999. In essence, what happened was Bill Clinton came clear in the impeachment trial and was not impeached. However, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was dethroned as was David Livingston, Newt's black-belted (karate) successor, who was found to have skeletons as well. The Saturday Night Live actor playing David Livingston asked, "What in hell happened? Clinton sins; Newt is dethroned and I lose my chance as Speaker of the House! What in hell happened?" Mitch asked himself the same thing after Morrie stirred his mind with such ultimate questions as, "Have you found someone to share your heart with? Are you giving to your community? Are you at peace with yourself? Are you trying to be as human as you can be?" (Albom, 1997, p. 34). Mitch found himself tied to computers, modems, and cell phones. Mitch's days were full, but he was really unsatisfied. He had once sworn he would never work for money, but would join the Peace Corps. "What in hell happened" is a question most of us ask.

Who Do You Say That I Am?

What can we do as literacy educators to transcend the centuries in a similar way that Morrie obviously did with his students? What can we do? As one who believes in the importance of
affect in literacy improvement, there are some basic principles of education that correlate with Morrie's teaching. These principles have been stated explicitly in the professional literature again and again by Purkey (1970), Purkey and Novak (1984), Purkey and Schmit (1987, 1996), Purkey and Stanley (1991), and Purkey (2000). The very first principle is one that assumes that every student at every level of literacy education is asking the very same hard biblical question, "Who do ye say that I am?" Students ask me that as I get out of my car and start to my office at the university. Who do ye say that I am Dr. Cloer? Some say I'm John the Babbler, some say a liar, or one of the major problems around here. Purkey & Schmidt (1987, 1996) declare that our answers to this most critical question in Wisconsin, Oregon, and South Carolina must include invitations, formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, intentional and respectful. These invitations must say "You're valuable, capable, and responsible. We're glad you're part of our learning community. Now, let's get with it."

I personally believe that most of literacy impairment is more a result of disinvitation than of being undisciplined or unmotivated. The least little inviting act in school is like a feast to an emotionally starved person (Purkey & Novak, 1984). Remember in the book and movie Forrest Gump, children wouldn't let Forrest sit by them on the school bus because he was a simpleton (Groom, 1986). Many years after Forrest had gone to Vietnam, won the Congressional Medal of Honor, met three presidents, and became a world famous ping-pong champion and business tycoon selling Bubba Gump's shrimp, he still thought of the girl Jenny because of that first little inviting act of offering him a seat on the school bus.

All literacy students that have attended one day in any class at any of our schools are also asking like Alice in Wonderland, "Who in the world am I?" In Forrest Gump, when Jenny remembered the incestuous sexual abuse and threw rocks at the house where it happened, Forrest
replied "Sometimes there just ain't enough rocks." Forrest was right. The reason Jenny lived like she lived, did what she did, and died like she died, was because of the way she had been made to feel unloved, incapable, and irresponsible. Morrie knew what really mattered; emotions matter.

To arrive at literacy empowerment instead of literacy impairment, students need invitations the way South Carolina blooms need the cool spring rains. When our students in literacy education are invited, they start joining in the progress of civilization in the elementary schools, they start realizing their human potential in the reading groups, and they start celebrating their existence as part of the human race (Purkey & Novak, 1984). Literacy students need invitations the way the old red mountain buckeye trees need the rich, black mountain soil around my home.

**Empowerment – More Than Knowledge**

Who are the people working in literacy that will have the most impact on students?

Purkey and Novak (1984) believe that having knowledge and imparting knowledge is not enough as a teacher. The guys involved in Watergate were all lawyers! These lawyers knew more about the law than anyone in America. It is true, as Whitehead (1967) warns, that fools generalize before becoming precise with much knowledge. We need to know more about everything. Whitehead says that education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge. Just knowing a great deal isn't enough. We should produce students who possess culture, activity of thought, receptiveness to beauty and humane feelings. Scraps of information, he complains, have nothing to do with culture. A merely well-informed man is the biggest bore on God's earth (Whitehead, 1967).
Simply being well informed as a literacy educator is really not enough. If knowledge were enough, none of those lawyers in Watergate would have broken the law. Physicians would be the healthiest people in America. Psychiatrists would be the best adjusted, and evangelists would be the most compassionate, kind, and humble people in our society. We literacy educators that stress the affective domain certainly believe in the art of the utilization of knowledge. But we declare, as Morrie would, that the excellence in education movement must involve something more than abstinence, fasting, celibacy, exhaustion, and high test scores. I know I personally can live for days on a single invitation. Invitations are as nourishing to me as my senior citizen Silver B-Complex vitamins. Morrie was so right when talking about the back and forth of life, and it being like a wrestling match. "Love wins. Love always wins" (Albom, p. 40).

**Most Important: How to Give Love**

Morrie's most important principle for life and the classroom concerned how we interact, and how explicit and intentional we are with our interactions. "The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and let it come in" (Albom, 1997, p. 52).

Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the Native American and U.S. Senator from Colorado was an idol of mine when I was in undergraduate school in the early 60's. He was a champion in judo. I read his biography recently, *An American Warrior*, (Viola, 1993), and I was reminded how all that Olympic talent in judo and political acumen for Washington was overlooked by all his teachers. I was especially intrigued by the notes in his school folder: "Makes no effort. Is conveniently absent when assignments are due. Poor in work habits and class attitude. Dreamy. Ben always has an excuse written out to get out of taking gym" (Viola, 1993, p. 29). This is the famous athlete, Olympian, judo champion, senator from Colorado. No one knew how to give him love at
school. No one saw any potential in Ben Nighthorse Campbell; no one even noticed his physical prowess.

Morrie saw things in people that others overlooked. For example, Mitch said, "He told me I was good enough to write an honors project – something I had never considered" (p. 133). Morrie knew that students need to have their potential pointed out to them regularly, explicitly, and intentionally (Purkey, 2000).

Inviting actions speak more clearly than mere inviting words. To really love is to act lovingly; to really care is to act caringly. It has to be regular, explicit, and intentional (Purkey, 2000). It would be silly for me, for example, to say to my wife of 35 years, "Elaine, why are you always wanting me to show that I care? I told you and even showed you that I cared when we were majoring in theater (drive-in theater at the edge of Williamsburg, Kentucky) in college in 1965." That wouldn't get it with Elaine. I have to act caringly, and do it regularly and intentionally.

People tell me, "Cloer, don't you know people will take advantage of you. Keep your guard up! You must counterpunch!" The people who tell me that don't understand. Many of them have even offered an invitation and had it turned down by a student. They don't understand that a student's declining of an invitation by a teacher is a way of testing its sincerity (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987). Don't quit sending invitations because one is declined. Invitations are to teacher-student relationships in literacy as black mountain soil is to towering Appalachian hemlocks. I've been studying invitations and the effects of such in schooling for 49 years (I started in the mountains when I was six.). It has been my finding that some educators really like students more in the abstract than in the concrete.
I recently read the biography titled *Mankiller* (Mankiller & Wallis, 1993), a book about the female Cherokee Chief, Wilma Mankiller, and how she was relocated as a child by the U.S. government to the inner city of San Francisco. In her book she tells how that every single person in school laughed at her name. She and her sister sat up at nights practicing talking so as to lose their accents and sound like the other kids. She writes that she spent most of her time trying to be as inconspicuous as possible in high school. She was never much of a scholar and doesn't have many memories from her years in high school. None of her teachers left enough impact for her even to remember their names. My good colleagues, the unwillingness to invite is just as lethal as the willingness to disinvite. Mankiller's teachers and Ben Nighthorse Campbell's teachers didn't put into practice what Morrie declared to be the most important principle. "The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in" (Albom, 1997, p. 52).

**Inviting Forth Excellence**

A colleague and I recently conducted and published the results of a large scale study involving high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools (Cloer & Alexander, 1991). We hypothesized that we could predict teacher effectiveness by simply having teachers react anonymously to ideological statements about students, teaching, and the enterprise of education. We then divided the teachers into inviters and disinviters. We found in that important study that teachers who were inviting and did not store their toxic waste in students, did not launch SCUDS at students, were judged statistically significantly more effective, and brought about more excellence in education than was achieved by the disinviting psychological terrorists. The terrorists, as a group, were rated ineffective on seven different performance dimensions by a
professional evaluator or rater who had no idea as to how these people responded to the statements.

**Conclusion**

As I get longer in the tooth, I realize more clearly whatever is done in teaching is done forever. Affirmations, confirmations and validations of students last forever. As Purkey (2000) says, all the devils in hell can't erase a single dot of an "i" in an invitation that is sent from caring, knowledgeable literacy educators, because whatever has been done is done forever.

I was watching the movie *Schindler's List* recently. Spielberg's assistant director is my wife's first cousin, and he spends a good deal of time at our mountain home trying to get me to reveal where I fish in the Appalachians for native trout. We watch his films, and that film *Schindler's List* affected me. Oskar Schindler saved 2100 people from a horrible early death. He was pronounced a righteous man and had a tree planted in his honor — but there is much more than that. One could see at the end of that disturbing movie many of the Jewish people that were alive many years later only because of Oskar Schindler, and they each placed a small stone on Schindler's grave because what Schindler did, he had done forever. He had taken on immortality through their lives! Morrie answered Mitch's question well about whether or not Morrie worried about being forgotten after death. He said, "I don't think I will be. I've got so many people who have been involved with me in close, intimate ways. And love is how you stay alive, even after you are gone" (p. 133). If literacy educators want to gain immortality, if literacy educators want to live on even in a time they won't get to see, then they should affect some student's spirit in a positive way. Exploring the art of student empowerment is really a worthwhile endeavor.
I will never forget in the movie, *Dances With Wolves*, what Kicking Bird said to Lieutenant John Dunbar. He said, "Of all the trails we take in life, one matters most, and that is the trail of a true human being." We must look for that trail, get on that path, and stay on it because of the promises we must keep. Our contracts must read that through our teaching lives we will invite, we will love, we will empower. These are promises we all must keep before we sleep.

**References**


