



# Helping Patients Search for Meaning in Their Lives

Reverend Timothy Taugher

Many of us have had one special teacher in our lives who not only instructed us in an academic discipline but also taught us about life. He or she graced us with skills as a teacher, support as a mentor, and love as a friend.

For Detroit sports writer Mitch Albom, that teacher was Dr. Morrie Schwartz, his sociology professor at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. Dr. Schwartz became Mitch's teacher, faculty advisor, and mentor who first helped Mitch realize his potential as a writer.

In 1974, Dr. Schwartz was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Doctors told him he had a year to live, and Dr. Schwartz intended to live that year to the fullest. On ABC's *Nightline*, he discussed what he was learning about life while facing death. Mitch saw the program and called his old friend. Dr. Schwartz invited his former student to his home in Massachusetts. That trip became the first of 14 weekly Tuesday visits that became, for Mitch, a course on the meaning of life.

During their visits, both teacher and student reflected on life, forgiveness, culture, suffering, marriage, family, emotions, money, aging, and death, all from Dr. Schwartz' unique perspective as a man facing his own death. Two themes emerged from this course, the first being, "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live." The second was that "Love is the only rational act."

Mitch later wrote a book titled *Tuesdays With Morrie* (1997). The book chronicled what Mitch learned in their Tuesday meetings and how he was able to bring a new perspective to his own life, which was overwhelmed by work and desperate for love and meaning.

In our lives, we all have encountered a "Morrie"—one whose life has taken on a new dimension and, in the face of that reality, has opened us up to see and live life differently. For most people, this new dimension is initiated by a crisis, a "moment of truth." The

sudden crises in Morrie's life caused him to truly begin to live.

In Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, 1974), the King of Hearts listened rather impatiently to the reading of a poem by White Rabbit and then declared, "If there's no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any" (p. 135).

Morrie, and many others like him, find meaning in the crises they face. Others search, struggle, and never seem to come to terms with what they have been dealt. The crisis can be too much to bear and the possibilities for meaning can become lost.

A crisis can be understood most easily in terms of our ability to cope with change. Change is a normal experience of life, happening all the time. Crisis involves change, but not every change is a crisis. A person in crisis, especially a health crisis, is undergoing a change that includes a shift of perspective. A sense of disorganization or confusion accompanies the experience of having to see things differently.

Spirituality is a dimension of our humanness. During the past several years, we have seen a phenomenal interest in spirituality. This interest is demonstrated by the increase in specialty shops, music, and books on spirituality, all examples of people searching for something meaningful and longing for a deeper connection and purpose in life. When we speak about spirituality, we are not referring to religion. Religion can be defined as an organized set of practices that surround a traditionally defined belief in the existence of God or divine sacred writings and a set of rituals used to express or practice beliefs. Spirituality may be a part of a religious belief or practice, but religion may or may not be a part of spirituality.

## Types of Spirituality

Morgan (1993) wrote that human spirituality is a quest for meaning. Humans are not

instinctual beings; we are the only animals that must decide who we are and what we have to do (Morgan). Human spirituality seeks an answer to the question, "How can you make sense out of a world that does not seem to be intrinsically reasonable?" In this search, people want to feel that the various circumstances of life make sense in the large scheme of things. If they do not, people want to feel that they have the strength to cope with life.

This strength is not attained or experienced easily. Patients become frustrated and angry at their inability to overcome the limitations of their lives, and they want to know that these feelings have not gone unnoticed by those near and dear to them. They want these feelings validated as appropriate or, at least, tolerable. What patients need are people to support them in their feelings and attempts to deal with those feelings. They do not want judgments or suggestions from others. Their overwhelming need is for a listening ear, an understanding presence, or a supportive hand. Patients gain spiritual comfort even if they have not been able to resolve the problems that thrust them into turmoil in the first place.

Another aspect of human spirituality is the moral side of life. A person's inner being is not only psychological and emotional but moral as well. Dealing with the crisis of a cancer diagnosis inevitably causes people to ask difficult moral questions. Morgan (1993) added that humans express their spirituality by establishing values and communicating them to others.

When patients have spiritual questions, their priests, rabbis, ministers, or other spiri-

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