

# An Ethics of Literary Care for Morrie Schwartz

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*And I said to myself, I don't want to be photographed as a spectacle, which I didn't think you would do but if I was in that state [severe bodily illness], then that is what we'd be doing.*

—Morrie Schwartz to Ted Koppel, October 13, 1995

It began with a simple article in the *Boston Globe*. A 78-year-old man, dying of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's disease), had, at the encouragement of friends and family, collected together some of his pithy aphorisms on living and dying and submitted them for publication. On March 9, 1995, an article on Morrie Schwartz's writings appeared in the *Globe*, written by staff reporter Jack Thomas and titled "A Professor's Final Course: His Own Death." A producer at *Nightline*, ABC network's late-night news program, saw the piece and brought it to the attention of the program's anchor, Ted Koppel. The rest, as they say, is history.

Morrie's story, launched into the public sphere through Thomas's article and made famous by *Nightline*, has since been told and retold in a dizzying number of forms: Morrie's posthumous autobiography, *Morrie: In His Own Words* (1996); the international best-selling memoir by Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997); the film adaptation of this text produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Jack Lemmon, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1999); and a theatrical staging cowritten by Jeffrey Hatcher and Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which premiered in New York in 2002.<sup>1</sup> There's also a thriving online Morrie culture that includes Wikipedia entries, a handful of fan pages and more than fifty

accounts on Facebook (most of which use Morrie's image and biographical information), and Mitch Albom's website, which offers us the opportunity to listen to five of his interviews with Morrie and scroll through photographs of he and Morrie. The life and death of Morrie Schwartz has become a multimillion dollar industry that, almost two decades after his death on November 4, 1995, is still thriving. Morrie Schwartz is in danger of becoming, if he is not already, a spectacle. This, as my epigraph makes clear, was the very experience that Morrie anticipated and feared. Concerned that media attention after his first *Nightline* appearance would capture the severe distress of his body and thus, perhaps, efface or overwrite his "lessons" in the art of living and dying, he initially declined subsequent *Nightline* interviews, suggesting that to do so would be "to be photographed as a spectacle." That spectacle, for Morrie, is linked to intimate and unproductive representations of the ailing body, a description that, at first glance, appears to be at odds with his explicit efforts to make public his illness and the slow process of his dying. Yet Morrie's resistance to being made a "spectacle" is not a contradiction but a *condition* of his public life. Using both his autobiography and his work with Ted Koppel, we can trace how he mobilized his story and his body for specific purposes, implicitly constructing the conditions by which he made them available to the public. The ways in which subsequent productions, like Oprah's film or Albom's memoir, take up or ignore these parameters, suggests that there are ethical limitations to how one mobilizes the life narratives of, and represents the bodies of, the aging, the dying, and the deceased. The "Morrie Schwartz industry" thus offers us an opportunity to sketch the parameters of what constitutes an ethics of "literary care" (De Moor 2003, 208) and to investigate how, specifically, Morrie's texts establish the conditions of consent for, not just Albom and Oprah's representations of his life, but future projects as well.<sup>2</sup> The frameworks developed here for caring for the literary and cinematic afterlife of Morrie Schwartz cannot provide us with either a template or guideline for ethical approaches to biography in general—the conditions of consent are far too specific to the texts Morrie has left behind—but, as we will see, the process of developing this ethics requires that we reconsider how we read the autobiographical works of those who become the subjects of subsequent lifewriting texts.

### **AN ETHICS OF LITERARY CARE**

The question of how Morrie Schwartz's life and death can be represented is, importantly, an ethical, not a legal question. In the United States, as John Paul Eakin (2004) has pointed out, an individual has little legal recourse to protect the details of one's biographical life from dissemination.

A right to privacy, he suggests, has proved to be “legally ineffective as a bulwark against invasive life writing,” and the scope of the First Amendment’s protection of freedom of expression has and continues to make it difficult for private citizens to control information about themselves so long as it is “true” and considered “newsworthy” (6–7). For public figures whose actions, behavior, and biographical information might be construed as newsworthy regardless of context, tight control of information is downright impossible. Property rights help these individuals protect and control the dissemination of their image or their creative products, but no such rights extend to the narrative of their lives. In death, one retains even fewer rights—legally, it is not possible to libel dead people or invade their privacy as both rights are said to expire with the individual (Couser 2004, 6). As a deceased citizen who chose to make his life and death public and who is now without property rights to his image or life narrative, Morrie Schwartz is unprotected by the law. Anyone might tell and retell his life narrative in any way he or she chooses and pocket the proceeds.

But the absence of a legal obligation to Morrie or his story does not preclude an ethical obligation: were we to govern ourselves and our relationships to each other strictly by what the law spells out, we would still be capable of doing both harm and wrong. This, I would suggest, is the crux of ethical practices—avoiding doing harm or wrong—but such practices demand that we navigate an arguably arbitrary system for understanding and evaluating behaviors and actions according to culturally determined codes of acceptability. To begin, we might ask whether it is ethical to narrate someone else’s life. Eakin has long argued that not only is it ethical, it is also unavoidable. He suggests in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) that our lives are lived in relation to one another—we do not experience our lives in a vacuum but inevitably in relation to other individuals; hence there is, to some degree, always some biography in autobiography. The booming memoir and relational autobiography market certainly bears out Eakin’s frank acknowledgment of the “increasingly large component of ‘we’ experience in the ‘I’ narratives we associate with autobiography” (1999, 75), but these practices represent more than just trendiness and popular acceptability; they are also practical and capable of preventing forms of ethical injustice perpetrated by excising someone from a narrative. Alбом’s *Tuesdays with Morrie* is such a case: for a memoir that traces the growth and development of the author under the compassionate tutelage of Morrie Schwartz *not* to narrate Morrie’s role in that process would raise more concerns about ethical practices than it would resolve.

Such an ethical conundrum must, however, take into account the issue of consent: to proceed in life storying when consent has been sought and denied constitutes unethical practice even if it is legally protected and even if the absence of that story in the lifewriting would seem to constitute a harm or wrong. There are, of course, exceptional cases where the harm done to the unconsenting individual must be weighed against the possibly greater harm done by the absence of his or her narrative, but as a rule, the individual's consent or lack thereof cannot be lightly dismissed. In the production of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Albom claims that not only did Morrie consent to being represented by Albom in a book, but this collaborative "project" was particularly important to Morrie. Albom writes,

This book was largely Morrie's idea. He called it our "final thesis." Like the best of work projects, it brought us closer together, and Morrie was delighted when several publishers expressed interest, even though he died before meeting any of them. The advance money helped pay Morrie's enormous medical bills, and for that we were both grateful. (1997, 191)

Twice in the conclusion (and once on his website), Albom's anxiety about profiting from Morrie's death is palpable, and each time he is quick to reassure us that Morrie approved and benefited from the project. However, the life writer's guarantee of consent cannot have the same authority as a documented record of consent. In fact, one might argue that little differentiates the many posthumous productions of Morrie's life from Albom's memoir: Albom claims Morrie did consent to his "project," but having predeceased the text's completion, Morrie never had an opportunity to consent to or withdraw consent from the finished product. In short, there is an absence of confirmed consent for all of Albom's Morrie Schwartz-related productions.

On the subject of lifewriting ethics where consent is unfeasible, it is necessary to turn to Thomas Couser's extensive work in this field. Those unable to offer consent, to "examine, respon[d] to, or resist that representation [of themselves]," or whose impairment or disability might make them subject to "abuse and exploitation," Couser (2004) argues, should be considered "vulnerable subjects" and demand greater care and protection (x). By Couser's parameters, Morrie Schwartz would be considered particularly vulnerable: he is elderly and ill, he has a close relationship with the life writer Mitch Albom, and once deceased, he is no longer able to withdraw

consent or protest misrepresentation. Yet, where Couser sees vulnerability, I would argue, there is also the potential to carve out an ethics of narrative care. Couser writes that

vulnerable subjects [are] persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else. Conditions that render subjects vulnerable range from age-related (extreme youth or age) and the physiological (illness and impairments, physical or mental) to membership in socially or culturally disadvantaged minorities. Of primary importance is intimate life writing—that done within families or couples, close relationships, or quasi-professional relationships that involve trust—rather than conventional biography, which can be written by a stranger. The closer the relationship between writer and subject, and the greater the vulnerability or dependency of the subject, the higher the ethical stakes, and the more urgent the need for ethical scrutiny. (2004, xii)

Couser's work is important for the caution it urges when working with vulnerable subjects, but his literal reading of relationships and his framing of them as liabilities does not allow for the important and useful ethical practices that might be drawn from them. Relationships facilitate the important work of transferring and gaining knowledge: the closer one's relationship to the "subject," the more one *should* know him or her, as well as how he or she would wish to be portrayed. Rather than frame this access to the subject of lifewriting as heightening the "ethical stakes," could we not also understand relationships between writer and subject as constituting the parameters for ethical practices? What if ethical conduct in a lifewriting project were determined by the degree to which the lifewriting practices reflected and respected the nature of the relationship and the knowledge gained through that relationship? Such a broad ethical practice would necessarily be qualified and shaped by each situation: each instance of lifewriting would thus be governed by the unique conditions attending that particular relationship, a situation that would not only enable different writers working on the same biographical subject considerable latitude in their representations but would also firmly preclude the possibility of developing an encompassing ethics of literary care for all situations—what works for one relationship could not and should not dictate the parameters of another.

If lifewriters model their practices on what they learn from both the individuals they write about and their relationship with those individuals, the parameters of a “relationship” must necessarily expand beyond the face-to-face interpersonal relations referenced by Couser. They need to acknowledge that they might experience, know, and form a relationship with the biographical subject and their narrative through a variety of media such as letters, stories, blogs, or audio-visual material: sometimes the legacies left behind by deceased subjects are lifewriters’ only means of entering into a relationship with them. Morrie, I would suggest, knew this. In fact, as we will see from my explorations of the conditions of consent governing the use of his story, he created texts that encourage his audience to have a relationship with him even after he had gone. “Death ends a life, not a relationship,” Morrie is said to have suggested in Albom’s memoir (1997, 174), and both his 1996 autobiography, *Morrie: In His Own Words* (originally published as *Letting Go*) and his work with Ted Koppel on the three-part 1995 *Nightline* series, “Lessons for Living,” certainly work to enable and model this principle. These texts thus allow anyone to have a relationship with Morrie, and while this relationship and the knowledge it generates might be different from Albom’s experiences with Morrie, the obligation to respect what is learned from the relationship is *not* different. Gary Kenyon and William Randall, in their work on storying the lives of the elderly, have offered a similar perspective: “Our ethical obligation to others is to respect the integrity and autonomy of another person by accepting the story that he or she chooses to live by. This is a *sine qua non* for entering the life world of another” (1997, 156).

Morrie’s texts quite literally offer us “the story” he chooses to live by and to *leave* by, but this does not mean we are obliged to literally reproduce Morrie’s narrative as he provides it to us. To “accept the story that he or she chooses to live by,” I would argue, does not mean lifewriters must slavishly adhere to the exact vision, form, or biographical reality of their subject; rather, it suggests a tacit understanding of what she or he was trying to achieve and the conditions under which the narratives were shared. Couser has advised that “over-writing their [the subjects’] stories—imposing an alien shape on them—would constitute a violation of their autonomy, an overriding of their rights, an appropriation of their literary, moral, and economic property” (2004, 19), and yet, in the case of Morrie Schwartz, the conditions of consent for the remediation of his story, as we will see shortly, allow lifewriters extraordinary latitude. Morrie *wanted* his narrative to circulate, and what concerned him was not the form of the narrative but its function. What Morrie’s texts and their remediation suggest is that we can,

arguably, impose an “alien shape” on his narrative without doing harm or wrong (in fact when we look to those remediations, we can see that Morrie’s story has undergone some dramatic changes), but what *is* required in an ethics of literary care is a sensitivity to the intent and the spirit that guided the sharing process and a willingness to honor the conditions by which the relationship, the knowledge, and the narratives were made available to us.

### **THE CONDITIONS OF CONSENT: MEDIATION, REMEDIATION, AND WITNESSING**

When we look to the narratives that Morrie Schwartz has left behind, and through which we might elucidate some guidelines for respecting the afterlife of those narratives, we must be aware that these are mediated texts. The nature of ALS renders mediation and collaboration necessary since it is a disease that slowly and systematically destroys one’s nervous system, a progressively worsening condition that moves up the body toward the brain. When his first article was printed and the first episode of “Lessons for Living” aired, Morrie had already lost the use of his legs and was growing progressively weaker in his hands. By the third installment of “Lessons,” Morrie’s torso and head were clearly incapacitated although he still retained limited motion in his hands, facial gestures, and the power of speech, even if it was noticeably breathier, more slurred, and less animated. He is, nevertheless, “biographically active” to borrow Gubrium’s phrasing: the nature of the medium requires only that he be able to make himself understood (Kenyon and Randall 1997, 158). The nature of mediation and collaboration here appears to be considerably different from what was required for the production of his own text, *Morrie: In His Own Words*. There, Morrie wrote out his aphorisms by hand but was forced to dictate the explanatory notes that accompany and explicate each, while a former student of his, Paul Solman, was then entrusted with transcribing and compiling the text which was published posthumously (Solman 1996, ix).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the different media and levels of Morrie’s physical participation in the production of these texts, *it is critical to recognize Morrie as an active agent in their production*, one with significant creative control over not just what is represented but also how it is represented. To do otherwise would divest his texts of the authority to establish the conditions under which subsequent texts may take up his story and, perhaps more importantly, would strike a devastating blow to the critical reception of the numerous forms of lifewriting composed by the elderly and the ill who require some level of assistance with their work. This is not to suggest that we should not pay

attention to the significant power imbalance that often attends such collaborative lifewriting or how that asymmetry affects what is told, but neither should we read collaborative work as signalling powerlessness, inferior intelligence, a lack of control, or a subordinate role in the production of a text.<sup>4</sup> Nor should we presume to know more about how the text was produced than what is revealed to us or presume that the production of the text is a physical act alone: lifewriting demands both physical and cerebral labor and, in the context of Morrie's life storying in *Morrie* and on *Nightline*, it would be unfair to attribute more power to Koppel or Solman to shape the texts than to Morrie.

Turning to these texts to trace the "story" Morrie chose to live by and leave behind, it is neither practical nor necessary to trace a comprehensive portrait of the life-storying practices modeled by Morrie to understand both his intentions and his priorities. In both the form and content of his texts, his mandate is very clear—above all, Morrie wants to help others and seeks to do so by teaching them his "message" about how to live and die. "Dying," Morrie maintains, "is both a private act and a community act [. . . .] What I'm trying to do in this community of friends and in general is to open up people, to touch them in their tender and compassionate places, so we can recognize our common humanity" (Schwartz 1996, 120–23). By presenting us with his illness and openly discussing his approaching death, he seeks not only to undo the cultural taboos that prevent people from talking about these subjects, but to model the means by which private acts can create a forum for understanding the self as part of a larger community. This "community" is both Morrie's goal and his audience—a touchstone for the knowledge and privacy that he is surrendering in revealing his process of dying to the public eye. It is in that spirit that Morrie also agrees to work with Ted Koppel even though he confesses, he is "usually a rather shy person and not very outgoing in public" (Schwartz 1996, 68); the opportunity, he felt, to get his "message out" (67) and enter into the lives of others was more valuable than his need for privacy.

Narrative is critical to Morrie's practice of creating and speaking to a community. "Community" is, importantly, never defined but allowed to signal differently throughout his texts as if to be as inclusive as possible. It is clear in both Morrie's texts and Albom's memoir that Morrie loves to talk, and while his tales are usually about himself and his own experiences, they are structured to serve his audience's needs and to invite them to participate rather than simply observe. His autobiography, for example, is structured as points of advice whose meaning is elucidated by autobio-



graphical anecdotes. Stories of the self are thus teaching tools, designed not only to convey knowledge but also to prompt some kind of action or response. In fact, by asking us to assemble Morrie's life story from the pieces he provides, the anecdotal and fragmented structure of the text compels the audience to participate in meaning-making and narrative-building projects. The *Nightline* program, on the other hand, offers more narrative structure through Koppel's camera and narration, but its conversational tone, much like what we see in *Morrie*, invites a wider dialogue with the audience. Its success in creating communities was twofold: according to Albom, the program inspired warm relations between Morrie and Koppel and even between Morrie and Koppel's production crew, who are said to have "felt like family" to him (1997, 69). As well, both Morrie's and Albom's books reference the impressive correspondence the program inspired and Morrie's considerable effort to respond personally to each letter (Schwartz 1996, 68; Albom 1997, 71).

Although Morrie's life story emerges from the stories he tells, not all of the narratives are explicitly autobiographical. One of the most consistently invoked and important narratives is an allegory about a wave that is designed to reinforce his message and model the role of narrative in community-building. In his autobiography, this story reads,

There's this little wave, a he-wave who's bobbing up and down in the ocean off the shore, having a great time. All of a sudden, he realizes he's going to crash into the shore. In this big wide ocean, he's now moving toward the shore, and he'll be annihilated. "My God, what's going to happen to me?" he says, a sour and despairing look on his face. Along comes a female wave, bobbing up and down, having a great time. And the female wave says to the male wave, "Why are you so depressed?" The male says, "You don't understand. You're going to crash into that shore, and you'll be nothing." She says, "You don't understand. You're not a wave; you're part of the ocean."

That's what I believe, too. I'm not a wave; I'm part of all humanity. I'm going to die, but I'm also going to live on. In some other form? Who knows? But I believe that I am part of a larger whole. (Schwartz 1996, 126–27)

This simple allegory, told in every text by *or* about Morrie, illustrates not just what he has learned but also why he is sharing it and what he expects us to learn from him: that it is comforting to recognize that one belongs to

a larger whole. This big-picture perspective invites one to contemplate not the dissolution of the individual but the boundaries that separate the individual from his or her community. Significantly, it is a “community” narrative that carries the weight of this message: the tale was told to Schwartz by his meditation teacher, who, it is implied, borrowed the allegory from elsewhere to distribute to his students (Schwartz 1996, 126). Morrie’s re-distribution of this seemingly authorless allegory to *his* students (both his reading/viewing audience and Albom) marks his participation in and extension of a storytelling community that privileges the function of texts over systems of authorship/ownership.

In that spirit, Morrie’s life story is intended for, and available to, his community to use to live better—both *Morrie* and *Nightline* are designed with that purpose in mind—and while he may not have been able to anticipate how his life story would be used and distributed in multiple, public, and profitable forums, these texts nevertheless signal and, in fact, model a modest version of that process. Perhaps, like the allegory circulating beyond its author, we might want to read Morrie’s desire to continue on in “some other form” as a gesture to both spiritual and textual remediation. While we cannot be certain that is what he meant by “some other form,” we can, I would argue, infer from his desire to open up private spaces and private sources of wisdom for the benefit of a wider audience that the continued circulation of his story and his message still serve his goals.

To read Morrie’s priorities as implying his consent to others’ use of his life narrative is a potentially dangerous strategy, but his purpose—to extract life from death and to make his dying useful to his community—arguably provides the ethical parameters that govern this consent: the representation must, above all, be useful. If so, the scope for possible forms and modes of representation is large; the binding conditions are that the presentation of his message must be useful to an audience without, we will recall, rendering him a spectacle. These two conditions are, in fact, closely linked since being useful requires that the reader be actively engaged, a condition that by definition a spectacle cannot create. A spectator looks, a spectator may even engage emotionally with the content, but a spectator remains outside of the event before, during, and after: no role, action or obligation on the spectator’s part is suggested in a relationship between a spectator and a spectacle. The unengaged spectator has the capacity to transform an event into, what Foucault (1995) calls, a spectacle—an event saturated with “theatrical elements” designed to provide an object for our gaze (9). The threat of being transformed into a spectacle is one of the risks

of representing trauma; although he does not represent it as such, Morrie's dying does represent a form of trauma. Even while he attempts to unpack how our culture codifies aging and dying as traumatic, the reality is that, as we engage with his narratives, we are aware that the speaking subject, and hence the very text we are experiencing, is in danger of expiring and has, in fact, already expired.

Yet, by creating opportunities to witness and to bear witness, Morrie manages the trauma embedded in his texts and the threat of the spectacle that attends the representation of his death and his dying body. Witnessing, unlike spectatorship, requires us to engage meaningfully with another person, and by doing so acknowledge and shape the subjectivity of the other; it demands that we reach beyond our selves or expand our understanding and acknowledgment of being a fully realized human to encompass the other (Oliver 2001). Giorgio Agamben (2002) has suggested that at the etymological root of "witness" in Greek is remembering, an imperative incumbent on not just he who writes or speaks but also he who reads or listens (26). The act of witnessing changes the recipient of the narrative, who will remain aware of not just the external condition that has changed him, but of the fact that he has been changed. As a result, a narrative that produces the activities of witnessing thus not only inspires the kind of change and encourages the kinds of communities Morrie sought to create, but also allows for the representation of trauma, death, and dying in productive ways that encourage continued memory and sustained effect rather than just affect.

It is, in fact, critical to our understanding of Morrie's strategies for keeping the threat of the spectacle at bay to carefully parse emotion and identification from productive acts of witnessing. An emotional response does have the potential to generate the activities of witnessing, but not if it remains the only response; moreover, identification supposes a capacity to understand an experience and thereby claims to inhabit it which, Giorgio Agamben (2002) argues, is impossible (34–35). As Dominick LaCapra writes, witnessing "should reactivate and transmit not trauma but an unsettlement . . . that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim" (1999, quoted in Hesford 2004, 113). Yet even empathy can be dangerously misleading, for it suggests that the "original subject" has a complete grasp on his or her experience (an assumption that witness theorists like Agamben seek to trouble) and that the affective afterlife of this experience might somehow be readily made available to others (Hesford 2004, 113).

The activities of witnessing are difficult and demanding, and yet Morrie takes up the challenge of not only modelling this process in his own ap-

proach to death but also representing his body in such a way as to encourage his audience to recognize and *use* his experience rather than simply observe and empathize with it. His texts make clear that even though he values emotion and readily admits that he cries and mourns for himself, he distinctly frames acts of witnessing with a certain degree of detachment:

I started writing these aphorisms for my own benefit. It was a way to distance myself from my illness and remind myself of what I needed to do to maintain my composure throughout my illness. I wanted to get a hold on what was happening to me, and I wrote down what I was going through because that helped me objectify my experiences and be a witness to my own process. (Schwartz 1996, 66)

I look at myself, and sometimes I see a dysfunctional person, someone in need of much help. Sometimes, I see a wise old man. But I always look at what's going on with me as if it were happening to somebody else. . . . By projecting my experience outwards, I don't have to be fully identified with the subjective process of my illness. . . . Another way to detach or witness what is happening is to write things down. By writing it down you gain objectivity. So I write about my ailments, my pains, my dysfunctions, I can get outside of myself. A symptom becomes something I can analyze and think about rather than a purely subjective experience. . . . (Schwartz 1996, 101–02)

The witnessing Morrie speaks of here and in the guiding aphorism of chapter nine of *Morrie: In His Own Words*, “Be a witness to yourself,” is directed towards the productive nature of acknowledging one’s *own* “physical, emotional, social, and spiritual states,” and suggests an awareness of the benefits of moving outside of full identification and emotional involvement (1996, 98). Distance is critical, but it is not, he is adamant, a means of avoiding experience; rather, detachment enables one to find a productive way of engaging with the experience. In our own acts of witnessing, the ability to suspend emotion can productively enable us to move beyond the collective affective response that Morrie’s experience invites to consider how we might more meaningfully live our lives and participate in the greater community or “common humanity” of which Morrie speaks. That he identifies writing as a means of mobilizing that distance and detachment transforms his text into more than just a tool for us to use: it is also a tool for him. But this strategy is not without its dangers. Morrie’s philosophy of witnessing suggests a kind of compartmentalization that is both reductive and, perhaps, impossible to

practice. Moreover, detachment in service of transforming the subject into an object is just as unproductive as feeling too much—both are at risk of transforming what should be an act of witnessing into a spectacle.

Morrie is aware that in representing his body in text and on television, there is a distinct possibility of his becoming a spectacle, but his texts work hard, with varying degrees of success, to ward against this by carefully mobilizing his body in certain ways and compelling his readers to be active participants in the text. *Morrie* is structured to encourage this process: each of the eleven chapters offer a series of aphorisms intended to instruct; they are accompanied by commentary that explicates how he puts these aphorisms' specific concepts into practice. (Even the text's shape and layout encourage readers to associate it with the self-help genre.) In respect to the body, Morrie advises his readers not to dwell on its physicality, and he is able to model this process without effacing the material reality of his own suffering body. The first chapter, "Living with Physical Limitations," for example, offers explicit advice on how to cope, not with the failing body, but with the emotional impact of living with a failing body. His physical body is present and represented but, as this chapter makes clear, it is his readers' psychological health and not their physical health that Morrie seeks to treat. The chapter closes with an important aphorism which the text subsequently models: "Don't stay preoccupied with your body or your illness. Recognize that your body is not your total self, only part of it" (Schwartz 1996, 13). The body can and will fail, Morrie demonstrates, but because it is not our "total self, only part of it," a person's psychological and intellectual capacities are not necessarily tied to its fate (Schwartz 1996, 14). Moreover, he demonstrates, the body can impact the self in positive ways if we open ourselves up to the experiences it provides—even the very painful experiences. In *Morrie*, every invocation of his body is designed to explicate an aphorism; outside of the first chapter, he does not dwell on the body except in relation to what we might learn from it. In framing the body, specifically his dying body, as a pedagogical tool, Morrie models a very specific function for the body that shapes and guides how and what he narrates: unless it can be directly mobilized in service of learning about better ways of living, Morrie's narratives imply, the suffering of the body is irrelevant and unrepresented. In these ways, Morrie seeks to make aging and dying more than just a bodily process, but one that can enable psychological, intellectual, and emotional growth, not in spite of the body but, sometimes, because of it.

Morrie's desire to liberate the process of dying from being considered exclusively in terms of the body would certainly find favor with theorists of

aging like Kathleen Woodward (1991) and Sally Chivers (2003), who make very similar arguments, but it does present considerable problems for those who take up and remediate Morrie's narratives in visual media. How does one *show* the process of learning from the body so critical in *Morrie*? Fortunately, Morrie has left behind a visual legacy in his work in the *Nightline* programs, which models some compelling possibilities for exercising an ethics of care across genres and media. In the *Nightline* interviews, as in *Morrie*, the limitations of Morrie's body are subordinated to representations of what he can do: his animated face fills the frame of the camera, and the infrequent shots of his wheelchair-bound body are restricted to "casual" footage outside of the formal dimensions of the interview. Even as Koppel and Morrie discuss the limitations of his feet or his hands, these limbs remain visually unrepresented. Only twice in the program are we asked to view Morrie's body with the intent of looking at his body: in the first episode, we see Morrie prone on a massage table, naked but covered from the waist down. Morrie is neither looking at the camera nor providing a voice-over that might frame how we view this scene; we are asked to simply gaze upon his frail and pale body as a masseuse works on it. The scene is suggestive of medicalized narratives of illness that can transform a person into the object of someone's labor and seems dangerously close to rendering his body and, in turn, his illness, a spectacle. As part of the introduction, this scene implies what visual and narrative perspective will dominate the remainder of the program, but if such expectations are engendered by this moment, they remain unfulfilled. Whether this brief clip is meant to invoke narratives of aging and illness in order to dismantle them or is a cinematic shorthand for framing the subject matter in order to quickly engage an audience's interest is difficult to ascertain. In all likelihood, there are elements of both intentions at work since these perspectives are never invoked again.

The second instance where *Nightline* focuses our gaze on the limitations of Morrie's body is at the end of the third and final episode when Ted Koppel asks Morrie to demonstrate for the audience how challenging it is for him to put on his glasses. Thirty seconds of footage are devoted to this moment, and although Morrie agrees to the conditions of the exercise, it is difficult to watch the scene without feeling that, after almost a full hour of programming that found intelligent and sensitive ways to address the subject of the dying body, it is gratuitous. When we are told shortly afterwards how and when Morrie died, it is clear that the scene's intent is to dramatize the illness to provoke a strong emotional response in viewers. Thus, here, in the penultimate moment of Morrie's life (according to the

program's representation of it), Morrie's body has become a spectacle. It is not the emotional content that renders it so but the uselessness of that content; at this late stage of the program, we are either already emotionally invested in Morrie or not, and prolonged footage of his body's disabilities seems unlikely to change the nature or the degree of our attachment to him or our commitment to fulfill what he asks of us.

If *Nightline*, in these two moments, seems eager to capitalize on Morrie's willingness to use his body and forgo his privacy in order to heighten the dramatic effect of the piece, it is at least some relief that Morrie was aware such a trade-off would be necessary: "Maybe they are using me for a little drama. That's okay. Maybe I'm using them, too. They help me get my message to millions of people. I couldn't do that without them, right? So, it's a compromise" (Albom 1997, 132). These terms of reciprocal "use" carefully position Morrie as an active agent in big business, rather than its elderly victim; moreover, they suggest that Morrie is aware that the program would require a limited invasion of his privacy and has accepted it as a legitimate sacrifice in light of the benefit of his being of use to a wider audience. Although the words quoted above are Morrie's as reported by Mitch Albom in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie's own texts reveal similar, if vaguer, allusions to such a compromise: in both *Nightline* and *Morrie*, Morrie acknowledges his indebtedness to the program for allowing him to "get my message across" ("Lessons"): "How did I feel about talking to ten million people? That's a whole lot more people than ever attended my lectures at Brandeis! I was so pleased so many had heard what I had to say. . . ." (Schwartz 1996, 67). The primacy Morrie affords to the size of his audience and his willingness to forgo his usual shyness and privacy in pursuit of that audience should not be mistaken, however, for a *carte blanche* for rendering Morrie and his narratives in any way so long as it garners a significant audience: there are both conditions set and precedents modeled that, taken together, implicitly establish what might be called guidelines for exercising an ethics of literary care in subsequent productions of Morrie's story.

### RE-MEDIATING MORRIE: A FEW CASE STUDIES

Morrie's story has undergone literally countless tellings and retellings; since it was first posted in 2005, his Wikipedia entry, for example, has undergone almost five hundred changes (at the time of this writing) by over two hundred users, and high school students routinely create Facebook profiles for Morrie, no doubt connected to school projects (Wikipedia, 2011). The user-generated online content is growing and shifting all the time, a testament to both the continuing interest in Morrie's story and the

necessity for some kind of ethical framework to guide how he and his narrative are being used. While it is simply not possible to trace a complete, comprehensive portrait of what and how Morrie's story circulates, from a few well-chosen case studies we can not only sketch the range of forms and narrative modes that his narrative has inspired but also assess how these texts have negotiated Morrie's desire to be useful and not a site of unproductive emotional attachment or spectatorship.

In this project, literary, cinematic, and theatrical remediations are to be preferred over the online examples, not only because they have not changed over time, are still available for consumption, and are still being consumed, but also because they are often the primary modes in which Morrie's story circulates, whereas the online narratives are designed as supplementary material.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in all of these texts, the remediations of Morrie and his story are not based on his autobiography or his work with Ted Koppel, but rather, derived from Mitch Albom's memoir of his experiences with Morrie. Each text refers us back to Albom's memoir (with Oprah's film and Hatcher and Albom's play this is made explicit in the shared title, *Tuesdays with Morrie*) and, as a result, Morrie's version of his life story becomes secondary, even tangential, to the Morrie Schwartz industry. Even the publishers of Morrie's text presume that readers arrive at it via Albom's memoir. Although originally published before *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the back cover of the second edition of the *Morrie* trade paperback reads: "For everyone who enjoyed the inspiration and wisdom of Morrie Schwartz in Mitch Albom's moving bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, here is Morrie's own book, presenting the philosophies by which he triumphantly lived, even as he faced the end of his life" (Schwartz 1996). The discourse here not only suggests that Morrie's text was (impossibly) produced after Albom's but frames it as a companion piece—a way to prolong one's enjoyment of Albom's narrative by continuing to consume related products. While this is probably not an inaccurate assessment of the order in which people read these texts (first Albom's memoir, then Morrie's texts or the play or film), how the audience approaches and uses these texts was of particular importance to Morrie in the sharing of his story. If the film and play are designed to capitalize on the success of Albom's memoir, to what degree do they encourage an audience to learn from Morrie and use his message? How do they work against an audience's desire to prolong or reexperience a purely affective response? And, as adaptations, how much responsibility falls on Albom's memoir for encouraging or evading some of the conditions of consent that Morrie's texts suggest?



Although these texts are remediations of Morrie rather than adaptations of Morrie's works, they are, by the ethics of literary care that we have established, still responsible for their use of his life story. However, the conditions of bearing witness have changed considerably in the *Tuesday with Morrie* texts. In these texts, Albom takes center stage in the form of "Mitch," an autobiographical character, and Morrie becomes a biographical character. Not only is Mitch the protagonist and focal point, but we are intended to identify and empathize with his condition rather than Morrie's (as the introduction to Oprah's film explicitly reminds us). As a result, we are asked to learn Morrie's lessons by watching Mitch learn them rather than learn them from the character of Morrie ourselves. This scenario begins to suggest bearing witness to the witness rather than bearing witness to Morrie. However, if the goals of witnessing can be accomplished by these means, then whether this occurs directly through Morrie and his autobiographical texts, indirectly through Albom's renderings of Morrie, or, as seems to be the case in the *Tuesday with Morrie* texts, through Mitch, may be irrelevant.

Where Mitch's mediating role becomes a liability, is in the critique of his fast-paced life, which is used in each text to mark the baseline for Mitch's growth and development. We are supposed to learn Morrie's lesson about the value of communities by watching Mitch initially bungle his own; however, because we are also intended to identify with Mitch, there is an implicit critique of how we run our own lives. Asked on the one hand to identify with Mitch's life and yet also asked to condemn it, one way we might be tempted to manage what Morrie would call this "tension of opposites" is to respond to these lessons with affect (condemnation, sympathy, etc.) rather than effect (change our lives; Schwartz 1996, 46). How each text thus manages affect and demands real effect is of critical importance to an ethical use of Morrie's story and his body.

Of the three texts, the play and the film have significantly more difficulty than the printed memoir in effecting a real change in viewers and managing affect without rendering Morrie's body a spectacle. As visual media in the entertainment industry, they are expected to provide us with something to look at that will entertain us and so, not surprisingly, affect plays a considerably larger role in these texts than the memoir. However, the emotional content in these productions is not transformative; both texts encourage us to mourn, a mourning that reaffirms the tragedy of illness and dying that Morrie has been trying to undo. Moreover, in focusing our mourning on the loss of a specific individual, we efface the wider community that Morrie

is attempting to draw our attention to and draw us into. Although neither text is able to create moments of witnessing, Oprah's film is otherwise surprisingly sensitive to the priorities that Morrie's texts articulate and model. The film is highly sentimental, but its emotional content arises not from a spectacularization of Morrie's body but from the representation of the relationships between people. Morrie, in fact, is not the focus of this narrative; he is only the means by which Mitch learns to connect in meaningful ways to his girlfriend, his boss, and other people in his life. The camera remains with Mitch rather than Morrie in order to showcase how Mitch develops and internalizes Morrie's lessons. Our identification with Mitch is further encouraged by parallel developments between Mitch's emotional growth and our own emotional investment in the film: the more Mitch feels, the more we feel. Part of Mitch's growth is detailed in terms of his relationship with Morrie's body, yet his development into a compassionate caregiver is not represented as necessitated by a failing body; Morrie's body, when represented, changes very little. The passing of time in the film is marked by shots of seasonal changes rather than inscribing decline onto the ill body and, interestingly, the film refrains from heightening the emotional content of a moment through flashbacks to an able-bodied Morrie: when Mitch asks Morrie to describe a perfect, healthy day, we are not treated to a cinematic fantasy of what Morrie narrates—a "simple" day of food, friends, and physical activity—but stay in the present, dis-abled moment.

If the film can generate emotional content without rendering Morrie into a spectacle and can demonstrate the importance of relationships even if it does not materially change our own, it has mobilized Morrie's narrative in a way that is less ethically suspect than Albom and Hatcher's play. The play is less sentimental than the film, but it works harder to generate an emotional response in the audience and often uses Morrie's body in order to effect that response. Narratives of decline are marked strongly on Morrie's body as the play progresses, and the Authors' Note at the opening reminds actors and producers to prolong moments where the focus is on Morrie's inability to perform "the simplest things" (Albom and Hatcher 2008, 6). Mitch's relationship to Morrie's body is also rendered differently in the play: whereas the film offers us a scene of Mitch carrying the prone body of Morrie to the massage table, framing this moment as a loving but extraordinary painful burden that Mitch has willingly taken up, the play transforms Morrie into "*dead weight*" (Albom and Hatcher 2008, 22, italics in original). Although this "dead weight" is a stage direction to actors for playing the scene, its sentiment is also performed in the play's staging of Mitch's reluctance to

help move Morrie's body and his inability to do so gently or with compassion. This moment is an early one in the narrative of Mitch's relationship with Morrie, but it is nevertheless troubling how the authors envision the representation of the body. There is only one other moment of such intense physical interaction between Mitch and Morrie in the play: the dramatization of one of Morrie's coughing fits near the end of the play. In this scene, Mitch is required to forcefully "hit" and "slap" Morrie on the back in order to help him breathe again (Albom and Hatcher 2008, 33). While there is significant potential to represent this moment compassionately and as a sign of Mitch's emotional development, it remains *the* moment of his illness that Morrie specifically highlighted to Ted Koppel as too close to being a spectacle for his comfort. Unless this moment in the play can be rendered in way that is productive to Morrie's goals, it will undoubtedly make a spectacle of his illness for the sake of heightening the emotional content.

The play, in fact, seems to foreground the spectacle of Morrie's body: not only are his physical disabilities theatrically represented for affect without effect, but so too are his able-bodied scenes. Dancing is one of Morrie's favorite hobbies, and while the opening of the play gently ridicules his eclectic dance moves, the dancing at its close is carefully orchestrated to produce the maximum emotional impact: Morrie, we are told, is dead, and Mitch tells us about his visit to the cemetery:

The next time I visited the cemetery, I brought a blanket and some food and laid out a picnic. Morrie was right. It was a lovely spot. "You talk, I'll listen." I tried doing that and, to my surprise, the conversation felt almost natural. I realized why. It was a Tuesday. (*Mitch goes and sits at the piano. Music: "The Very Thought of You." Lights upstage reveal Morrie dancing. Lights fade.*) (Albom and Hatcher 2008, 41)

This song, "The Very Thought of You," has been used throughout the play to cue particularly strong emotional moments and its role is so critical to the narrative that the authors secured the rights for all productions to use the song. With the return of Morrie to the stage at the end of the play, dancing in full health, we are prompted to realize our loss and to mourn for it and the music is intended to heighten that affective response. Our mourning here, as in the film, is not transformative or productive; there is no call to action nor any outlet for transforming our emotional energy into one of the productive lessons that compelled Morrie to share his story in the first place. This focus on affect is made explicit in the Authors' Note where

the audience is conceived of as “a third character participat[ing] in the show,” and their role is to remember their own “experience[s] with death, illness and loss” (Albom and Hatcher 2008, 5). According to the authors, then, *Morrie* is a conduit not for improving one’s self or one’s relationships, but for revisiting private emotional experiences. If an audience member leaves the play wiser or with a renewed sense of their “common humanity” (beyond the shared affective response to the material on stage), it was certainly not mandated by the authors.

Although Albom’s memoir does not have to contend with the danger of rendering *Morrie* a visual spectacle in the same way that the play and the film do, it nonetheless engages in a more challenging negotiation of the conditions of *Morrie*’s texts. In some ways, the memoir exemplifies a conscientious attention to the modes of learning and witnessing that *Morrie* models: Albom is not overly sentimental, nor does his text attempt to pry the maximum affective response from us. His mode of bearing witness is much closer to the methodologies of detachment, especially detachment through writing, that *Morrie* advocates in his text. The memoir also explicitly honors, in both its form and its content, the teacher/student dynamic that *Morrie* so valued: the text is framed as a “thesis” with a “curriculum”; there is a classroom, a lesson plan and a graduation; and as we move through the text, this structure frames not just Mitch’s learning but our own (Albom 1997, Acknowledgments and 1). We are taken through the same lessons as Mitch and also asked to bear witness as Mitch did, but how Albom renders this opportunity to witness is where the memoir makes a dramatic departure from *Morrie*’s texts. If *Morrie*’s intent is to pull life from death, then Albom’s text refocuses our gaze back on the body as a site of decay and death. The text is, at times, graphic and intrusive in its description of *Morrie*’s body and how it functions:

He laughed and resumed his eating, a meal he has started forty minutes earlier. I watched him now, his hands working gingerly, as if he were learning how to use them for the very first time. He could not press down hard with a knife. His fingers shook. Each bite was a struggle: he chewed the food finely before swallowing, and sometimes it slid out the sides of his lips, so that he had to put down what he was holding to dab his face with a napkin. The skin from his wrists to his knuckles was dotted with age spots, and it was loose like skin hanging from a chicken soup bone. (Albom 1997, 35)

Mitch “look[s] for signs of the disease’s progression” and notes important milestones of bodily decay that increase Morrie’s dependency on his caregivers, the minutia of which, as we see here, renders the body repulsive and abject (Albom 1997, 56). These representations of Morrie’s body deviate significantly from the discourses of body offered and modeled by Morrie in his texts, but Albom refocuses readers’ attention on the body as a site of decay without rendering it a spectacle. Instead, these intimate portraits of the body are productive for they remind us that there is a real, suffering body present that is sometimes effaced by Morrie’s attempts to transcend it. We are asked to dwell on the body and acknowledge its suffering, not for the gratuitous satisfaction of feeling empathy (the abjection of the body prevents this kind of unproductive identification), but for the purpose of seeing where Morrie’s wisdom has come from and to better appreciate the real trauma, from which, in witnessing, we have had the opportunity to learn.

Not all of Albom’s representations of Morrie’s body are managed well, however. Early in the memoir, Albom suggests that Morrie has framed himself as “a human textbook,” and this metaphor is troubling because it suggests that Morrie and his body are a text whose lessons will be self-evident once read. (Albom 1997, 10). The words “human textbook” are not, importantly, Morrie’s but rather, Albom’s rendering of Morrie’s intention; they constitute a misreading that becomes, in Oprah’s film, a misrepresentation when they are placed directly in Morrie’s mouth. *Tuesdays with Morrie*, with its lessons and its representation of the body, has made Morrie into a “textbook” although no such language was ever used in any of Morrie’s texts. Nor has Morrie ever framed his lessons as writ on his body; what can be learned from the experiences of his failing body must be mediated by his gaze and his philosophy. Hence, his lessons cannot be self-taught by the reader or viewer but require Morrie’s active participation in meaning-making, a structure that not only allows him to retain authority over his body, its uses, and its meanings, but also allows him to be a mentor for the audience. Moreover, his active role as interpreter and mentor works to align his reading audience with Mitch and even involves himself as part of the community that is learning how to live and how to die. However, Albom’s memoir *does* seem to attempt to effect real changes in the lives of readers, and it offers us a kind of curriculum comprised of both Morrie’s lessons and readings of Morrie’s body as a means of doing so. If he has rendered Morrie into a text and redirected our gaze back to the abject body, it is still in service of Morrie’s goals and, importantly, models a way in which we can bear witness and honor the narratives of vulnerable subjects without being beholden to their exact form or vision.

The popular success of Albom's memoir indicates that there is a wide community that has had access to Morrie's lessons; whether it has put them into action is less certain. The content and productions of both the play and the film suggest that readers, having consumed Albom's text, are interested not in learning more, but in reexperiencing the pleasure of the story and rewatching Mitch's emotional growth and Morrie's dignified dying. The activities of the online Morrie Schwartz community bear further investigation, but their strong ties to Albom's text may very well run some of the same risks we see in Oprah's film and Albom and Hatcher's play. While the burgeoning Morrie Schwartz industry has transformed the man into an easily mobilized brand that can be leveraged to sell videos, theater seats, and even his own texts, it does not necessarily follow that doing so is a violation of our ethical obligations to Morrie's narratives. Morrie never implicitly or explicitly claimed ownership of his story but, rather, sought to make his narrative available to others and often alluded to the possibility that in "some other form" he would "live on" (Schwartz 1996, 127). What this article has attempted to sketch are the ethical parameters of this afterlife as inferred from Morrie's own modes and methods of telling his story. These conditions are useful not only for examining biographical treatments of Morrie, but also for affirming the right and capacity of the elderly and the ill to establish such morally binding conditions. While few have had the opportunities that Morrie Schwartz had to tell his tale, we are all at risk of having our life stories told with or without our consent in ways that may or may not reflect the spirit and intent with which we lived our lives or shared our narratives. It is thus imperative that we work to establish an ethics of literary care that can accommodate as well as respond to the conditions that govern each unique telling and retelling of life narratives. As we all move closer to becoming vulnerable subjects ourselves, we have a vested interest in carving out an ethics specifically dedicated to the care of our own stories.

### NOTES

1. In this article, I intentionally suspend the formal academic convention of referring to an author or a subject by his last name in deference to Morrie's wishes as expressed in his texts.

2. The modes of manufacture and dissemination of Morrie's online afterlife are so vastly different that they necessitate their own investigation but, I maintain, they remain ethically bound by the same conditions of consent governing the literary remediations that I elucidate.

3. Although *Morrie* is a posthumous publication, sections of it are read verbatim on *Nightline*, which suggests that the text's content was produced by Morrie with only physical assistance from Solman or, at the very least, that Morrie consented and approved of this representation of himself. We also know that Morrie approved of both the content and the format of *Nightline's* representation because this approval is implicitly conferred when Morrie granted Koppel subsequent interviews and explicitly confirmed twice within the space of the program.

4. See Couser's (1998) "Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing" for an extended discussion of power dynamics in collaborative lifewriting projects.

5. Even Oprah's made-for-television film is still available, albeit on YouTube, where it has been uploaded in eleven segments. Each segment has garnered an audience ranging from 75,000 to 225,000.

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