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Introduction

Reading Mitch Albom's popular book, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, is a marvelously uplifting experience that allows us to reflect on the most profound of topics. In the course of this reflection, we eventually realize that all of the people he portrays share certain characteristics. We are not really surprised to discover this. We all instinctively know that certain kinds of actions and attitudes are beneficial to us, while other actions and attitudes are not. But not all of us have the ability to articulate the differences.

Because Mr. Albom has done such an excellent job in creating honest characters, it is worthwhile for us to study them and what they have to say. It is also worthwhile for us to study how Mr. Albom has accomplished his task, for he touches on the heart of a great mystery, and he does so with surpassing skill.

Like great science, great theology, or great philosophy, great art teaches deep truth. The contemplation of the beautiful necessarily brings us to a deeper understanding of the world we live in.

Through these studies we can, perhaps, come to a greater understanding of how to form our own lives into things of surpassing beauty. As we work to accomplish this, we likewise discover that we gain a measure of peace with ourselves and with each other.

Can there be any better reason to while away an hour or two? If you think as I do, then find a comfortable chair, get a mug of something to drink and let us begin.

Each of the five sections begins with a discussion of the characters and what they did in the story. This is followed by an analysis of their actions in light of their approach to the world, their habits. Each section ends with questions for discussion and other readings, as an assistance to those who would like to explore these habits more deeply.

**The First Person:
The Blue Man**



Ruby's Pier

Mr. Albom begins with death and so shall we. Indeed, we could hardly do better than to begin with death, for death is a fact, though little discussed. Surely few pay it close attention in this day and age. The world is busy enough, entertaining enough, to keep the fact of our deaths at a distance, at least most of the time. Some few of us are brought up short every year by a sudden illness, a grim-faced doctor, or a hurtling ton of auto-sculpted steel, but by and large, the rest of us are untouched by the fact Eddie faces at the beginning of the novel, and we are determined to remain so.

For most of us, it seems odd to think it should be any other way. True, one or two of us who enjoy reading history may recall that certain men and women slept in their coffins every night as a way of keeping their deaths constantly before them. Perhaps we remember seeing in a children's picture book a cartoon monk, dressed in drab brown, scribbling away with a feather pen at a makeshift desk, with the black sockets of a human skull wordlessly watching him work, for the medieval religious orders used to do that kind of thing. "Live life from the grave!" they cried. It seems decidedly morbid to us today, but it was not so harsh a life as one might think.

The wise men of the East have a proverb, "It is useless to threaten a man who is not afraid to die." Indeed, the whole purpose of Zen meditation and similar eastern spiritual practices is to help reconcile the student to the fact of his impending death. In this respect at least, and whatever else one might say, Eastern and Western religious traditions are agreed. The wise man prepares for what he knows he cannot avoid. Whether it be flood or famine, drought or death, the wise man prepares.

The rest of us tend to do what Eddie did at the beginning of the story. We ignore the quiet cat feet of years and debilities, in the hopes that what is silently approaching may be avoided if only we refuse to notice it is there.

Pain: Death's First Cousin

As we approach death, we often experience pain. Eddie certainly did. Pain is, of course, not something to wish on anyone. But it serves a certain purpose, if only in forcing us to face the reality of death.

Pain and death share a family resemblance. Consider. Pain is, in a sense, a poverty – it is not a “something” so much as it is a lack of something: a lack of comfort, a lack of the ability to be peaceful. Now, some go through a whole lifetime of physical pain, they live an entire life of lack, but that is rather unusual. Our bodies work painlessly for most of us, most of the time. Once we survive the illnesses of childhood, we have – for the most part – several long score of years, perhaps three-score, perhaps more, in which physical pain is an uncommon visitor. We become used to our physical affluence, the wealth of health our bodies provide us. We may be short of money, of love, of joy, but – unlike Eddie – we don't spend most of our lives with a cane in our hand or pain shooting through us at every step.

Thus, for us, the first flash of pain is something of a shock, like the sudden realization that one's wallet is missing, or one's car is not where it was left. Something has been taken. Where there was wealth, there is now a hole, a lack, an emptiness – and fear. In a heartbeat we feel the knowledge pain brings: not only is something taken but... if this can be taken, what else is at risk?

Death is both the ultimate and
the unavoidable poverty.

In that first rush of pain, the worst part is not the suffering, but the fear. What else *can* be taken? What else *is* at risk? How bad

is it, doctor? A wealthy man stripped of his money finds his first weeks on the streets hard. Eating out of trashcans does not settle his stomach like the crystal glass of fine merlot had. Similarly, a healthy man finds it hard to stay in his chair or bed if only because he fears never being able to leave it. Pain is the poverty that prophecies. “This is taken now,” it whispers, “but there is more yet to be taken.”

The most painful part of this prophecy is its truth. We *know* more is yet to be taken. Like the buzzing alarm clock on a dreary Monday, pain awakens us to what is coming, whether we like it or not. But it does more. It not only awakens us, it begins to strip us of our self-possession in preparation for the door we must pass through, the unspeakable: death. In this sense, the poverty of pain is good preparation, for death is both the ultimate and the unavoidable poverty.

In the movie *Unforgiven*, Clint Eastwood’s character, William Munney, points out, “It’s a hell of a thing to kill a man. You take everything he ever had and everything he’s gonna.” This is a strikingly accurate summary of the situation. In death, we not only lose every earthly possession; we even lose our molded clay bodies to the grave. All that is left is what we have made of ourselves during our lives. And that is the test.

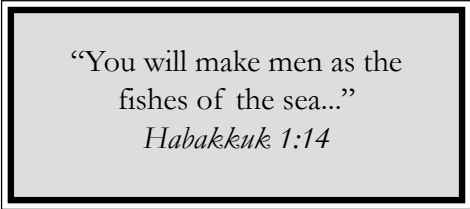
We have heard many things about the soul over the course of our lives. Scientists dispute it, philosophers dissect it, theologians describe it, priests prepare it and charlatans sell idols to heal it. Yet we need be none of these - we need meet none of these - in order to know one thing: love is its life. If we know anything about the soul, we know this much. In the end, knowing this and living it properly is enough.

Love is the life of the soul.

How Now Shall We Live?

But knowing a thing and living it are two different things. We can know something perfectly, but still live it badly.

Take Eddie and Dominguez for instance. They are not just maintenance men, they are fishermen. The amusement park built at “the end of the line” lies near the sea. The men fish through a small hole cut in the boards, sixty feet above the ocean. But Eddie knows what Dominguez refuses to acknowledge. Even if the fabled halibut was hooked, “you could never pull a fish that big through a hole that small.”



“You will make men as the
fishes of the sea...”
Habakkuk 1:14

Eddie may not have read Habakkuk, but he felt in his bones the connection between the uncaught halibut on the other side of that hole and himself. “How narrow is the gate and strait is the way that leads to eternal life: and few there are that find it!” (Matthew 7:14). It would be easier for a halibut to pass through the hole cut in the boards than for a man to pass body and soul through Death’s narrow door. On at least some level, Eddie knows this necessary truth. Dominguez does not.

And it is Eddie alone who reasons his way to another truth. When he sees Freddy’s Free Fall fail, he alone realizes the thread by which four human lives are suspended is itself on the point of breaking. The key that opens death’s narrow door and allows Eddie to begin his journey is the same key that snaps the cable of Freddy’s Free Fall. It might be said of him “My life is cut off, as by a weaver” (Isaiah 38:12).

From Death to Life

Are you startled? By now, you may have discovered something here which you did not entirely expect. There is more to this story than meets the eye. There is indeed: much more. A great story tells its tale not only in the grand scale of the plot, but in every aspect of the tale. Every detail serves to magnify the story being told. And this is a great story.

When we speak truly of death and of what follows, we echo what has been said before. Indeed, in certain writings, the wisdom of the dead has been captured with such brilliance that we carry the suspicion the men who wrote are not truly dead. As we will see, many of the intricate details of the novel resonate within us because they echo a greater story, a Unique Story. Thus it is with all that we do. We approach greatness when we capture the essence of this one epic story in our lives and our speech, making it fresh by the breath of our words and the character of our deeds. We will discover that the details of this novel echo the One Great Story.

Consider a single example (though we will consider many more). Death begins Mr. Albom's tale, but life is its setting. We return again and again to the old amusement park, knowing that all old amusement parks are found "at the end of the line."

"Life and death upon one tether
and running beautifully together."
from "Crystal Moment"
Robert Peter Tristram Coffin

Hard by this joyful life lies that ancient symbol of discontinuity and death, the sea, surging endlessly, its pounding surf

reminding us of ancient days and of “them that are slain the heart of the sea” (Ezekiel 28:8).

Much can be said about the connections between these two things, but let us begin the conversation this way. The marriage of amusement park and ocean helps us examine Eddie’s approaching death without fear. Their union is natural, the two complement one another. Thus, it is perfectly natural to discover that Eddie’s death, his departure from the amusement park, the end of the line and the beginning of the journey, plunges him into the sea and thereby into his new life.

Through this transition, we can see that Death is not a loss. Indeed, Death is transformed from a loss to an opportunity. What is past cannot change, but what is past affects his new life most profoundly, for this new life turns out to be a summary of all that he has been, all he strove to be.

In Greek legend, a man named Sisyphus offended the gods, and was condemned to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain. But the gods arranged it so that the boulder would always slip from his grasp before he reached the top. Thus, Sisyphus is in an eternal, useless struggle against a dead weight that will always elude his grasp in the end. He cannot win, but he is condemned to the struggle despite this fact.

Part of our fear of death lies precisely in this story of Sisyphus. We fear that the struggle of our life, a struggle in which we never have time enough or love enough, will ultimately remain unfinished. We fear being useless. The older we get, the more certain we are that we have not completed what we intended. Indeed, as time goes on, the more we fear that our death will render our life like that of Sisyphus: the boulder will elude our grasp at the last.

So it is worthwhile to note that Eddie begins without fear. Fear, pain, worry: all are being swallowed up as he falls headlong into the sea. “This is he who came by water and blood... not by water alone, but by water and blood” (1 John 5:6). Fear impedes understanding. He must be free of fear if he would be able to hear

what is said to him. He must hear in order to learn. But there is more.

Because we are “saved through water” (1 Peter 3:20), Eddie is plunged into water, for “the heavens existed of old and earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God” (2 Pet 3:5). Fear is a kind of death. He is not only being freed of fear, he is also being reborn into his new life. Like any new-born child, he has much to learn.

The Sound of Silence

Some things change, some things do not. Eddie awakens from his plunge into the sea to find he is limber as a babe. His physical pain is gone, but he is still on Ruby Pier. He quickly encounters his first person: the Blue Man.

The Blue Man carries this first conversation, reading Eddie’s mind and answering his questions as they arise. How is it possible for the Blue Man to accomplish this feat? “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9). The Blue Man must have these skills in order to answer Eddie’s questions. Why? Because God has given Eddie the gift of silence.

“It is good to wait with silence for the salvation of God. It is good for a man, when he hath borne the yoke from his youth. He shall sit solitary, and hold his peace: because he hath taken it up upon himself. He shall put his mouth in the dust; there may be hope.”

Lamentations 3:26-29

Eddie is rendered silent because he needs to listen. “Let the islands keep silent before me and the nations take new strength; let them come near, then speak, let us come near to judgment together” (Isaiah 41:1). During the long years of his life, Eddie has made himself an island, cut himself off from others. He needs to reconnect. But to do that, he needs to listen. Eddie and the Blue Man are each given the gifts necessary to accomplish what is set before them.

Once Eddie understands his role in the Blue Man’s life, or rather, in his death, he expects only one thing: judgement. Notice how he reacts. He squares his body. He prepares for what is coming. He does not reject the truth of his complicity or hide behind the fact that he was a child, completely unaware of what he had done. Rather, he accepts the truth set before him, and he readies himself for judgment. Eddie’s readiness to accept responsibility for his actions is precisely why Eddie is worthy of mercy.

Instead of wreaking justice upon him, the Blue Man merely confirms what he has already shown by his actions. He had begun with quiet conversation and a warm touch. Now he tells Eddie that he has entered into the first step of heaven. Eddie begins to discover the truth: he is the student. He will meet five people, who will each serve as teachers, helping him to come to a deeper understanding of himself, a deeper understanding of God. He will learn that with God, “mercy triumphs over justice” (James 2:13). The Blue Man is the first example of this truth.

Communion

Eddie’s communion with God’s messengers, his ability to communicate what he needs to say, grows over time. As we will discover later, Eddie spent some of his life hiding from God, and the rest thinking he had gone unnoticed. This poor relationship with God is mirrored in his poor relationship with his father. His image of God is built in part on his image of his own father – a

man who had harsh, unforgiving standards. Eddie had good reason to think God and his father had common goals for him.

After all, his father had wanted Eddie to work at Ruby Pier, he had always wanted his son to follow him in his work. Since Eddie *had*, in fact, lived exactly this life despite the fact that he had always wanted to leave that place, Eddie concludes that this must have been God's will. Eddie unconsciously assumes that God must be much like his father. From this point of view, his father had become, in a certain sense, a prophet of God; Eddie's own life was the evidence.

Thus, the Blue Man's poor relationship with his own father, the poverty that drove him to the silver nitrate and, eventually the freak show, mirrored Eddie's stormy family relationship.

God's gifts transform. By helping us understand what happened in our own life, we become prepared to share in His life. And that life, ultimately, is heaven: sharing in the divine life of love.

We cannot accept an expensive gift
when our hands are full of cheap
baubles. We must empty our hands so
as to grasp the rich gift that is offered.

The Blue Man is uniquely suited to introduce Eddie to heaven. Eddie spent the years following his wife's death in his own self-created poverty. He lived a poverty of friendship, a poverty of human acquaintance. During his life, the Blue Man also lived this poverty of loneliness. His version of Ruby Pier or at least what Eddie can see of his version of Ruby Pier, is empty save for the two of them. "This is not your heaven, this is mine," says the Blue Man.

But is that all there is to heaven? Do each of us wander about in our own created world? It hardly seems possible. We are each made for intimate communion with God. God desires intimate