Don’t let go too soon, but don’t hang on too long (Albom, 1997: 162).

Introduction

Internationally renowned American author Mitch Albom’s memoir, Tuesdays with Morrie: An old man, a young man, and life’s greatest lesson (Albom, 1997), is a true personal story that centers on an important period in Albom’s life. It depicts a moving reencounter with his former professor, Morrie Schwartz, with whom he had lost touch. Tuesdays with Morrie is a nonfiction text narrated from the first person that embraces Morrie’s life. It depicts a moving reencounter with his former teacher during his last few months of life. Mainly aimed at paying off Morrie’s medical bills, the book was not immediately accepted by the publishers, who considered Albom’s work too depressing and not interesting to the wider audience, which reveals societal inabilities to deal with the topics of aging and dying all-too-familiar to gerontologists. Although the memoir was not an instant success, slowly and gradually it became the bestseller in the U.S. A. and worldwide, and was translated into 45 languages (CBS This Morning, 2017). Since the memoir’s publication nearly a quarter-century ago, there has been vast engagement with it from many different perspectives focusing on love, relationships, wisdom, and, particularly, the meanings of life and death. This paper, by employing literary gerontology, adds to these discussions and provides fresh perspectives on both well-trodden passages and scarcely discussed, but significant themes that can help better understand the complexities of aging and the end of life narratives. At the same time, it provides counteracting arguments about social issues such as ageism and fear of death and old age, creating a dialogue between dominant narratives about aging and their critiques.

Literature in age(ing) studies

Although the potential of the study of literary texts has often been neglected, especially in the traditional field of gerontology, a critical literary approach towards old age can lead to a better understanding of the dynamics of aging, and provide us with important perspectives for interpreting later life (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Casado-Gual, Domínguez-Ru, & Oró-Piquéas, 2019; Casado-Gual, Domínguez-Ru, & Worsfold, 2016; de Medeiros, 2007, 2016; Falcus, 2016; Wyatt-Brown &
Rossetti, 1993; Zeilig, 2011). Literary gerontology, not based on scientific data, rigid disciplines or empirical forms of knowing, gives voice to often-muted aspects of aging, and contributes to broader gerontological knowledge (Casado-Gual et al., 2016; Hepworth, 2000; Oro-Piqueras, 2016; Zeilig, 2011). However, there is not one distinct research method, model or heuristic technique in literary age(ing) studies, as there is not one single experience of aging. Narratives about aging do not provide us with answers to questions about later years, but rather reveal what aging implies socio-culturally, politically and individually (Falcus, 2016; Zeilig, 2011). As Oro-Piqueras succinctly puts it, “literary representations of the aging process and old age can therefore portray and create understanding of the intricacies of aging as a complex and multifaceted experience within the life course, encouraging the reader to reconsider stereotypes and spare images of old age” (Oro-Piqueras, 2016: 194).

Relatedly, Zeilig argues that “a narrative allows for the perspective of the listener – for how the story is heard,” understood and assimilated depending on “our interpretive abilities,” circumstances and subjectivity (Zeilig, 2011: 10, 12). Although aging is culturally denoted as mental and physical deterioration, it is not a linear trajectory, “but a dynamic process of highly variable change” (Hepworth, 2000: 1). Literary approaches to age narratives show that the meanings that older adults attach to their lives and, especially, to the process of aging, can reveal important aspects about their self-perception, self-development and about how they deal with the experience of growing older (Casado-Gual et al., 2016; Casado-Gual et al., 2019; Cohen-Shalev, 1989).

Many life stories that focus on the meaning of life and aging are often found in first-person narratives that can shape our identities by providing understandings of selfhood in particular cultural and social environments (de Medeiros, 2007; Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999). Even if writers can convey their life experiences and knowledge through any literary genre, it is especially through essays and memoirs that authors become symbolic guides to their readers and pass on their “particular view of the world” along with their wisdom stories (Casado-Gual, 2019: 88). The use of the memoir format allows one to explore the complexities of growing older, make sense of our past and present experiences, and connect the readers beyond their own life experiences by merging their personal feelings with sociocultural trends (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Rak, 2013; Randall, 1995; Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). Couser (2021) observes that memoir, in contrast to other literary genres like fiction, drama and poetry, allows writers to enact and maintain human relationships and identities, especially those that are often underrepresented. As will be demonstrated in this study, memoirs that focus on the meaning of life and aging are often perceived as a model of ‘wisdom’, and coincides with “the highly moral view of old age” (Casado-Gual, 2019: 87). Although mentorial relationships are a recurrent theme in various forms of popular culture and contemporary films, such as the 1988 American classic, Bull Durham (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017), the typical mentor figure is closely related to Ancient Greece and its philosophy.

For ancient Greeks, the mentor was an embodiment of ethical values, commitment, wisdom, affection and life-long learning, which some age scholars define as “an art of living” or ˇars vivendi (Baars, 2012; Casado-Gual et al., 2019; Edmondson, 2005). While wisdom and knowledge are inevitably associated with later life in contemporary culture, in Ancient Greece being wise was not an assumed consequence of getting older, but rather a needed condition to step into old age. Baars (2012) observes that in ancient Greek philosophy age had no role to play in the notion of wisdom, because people were considered wise by the soundness of their argument. Therefore, age-related issues were pushed to the margins of Greeks’ agendas. Plato, for instance, believed that the ability of self-reflection and the capacity to understand philosophy regardless of one’s age were the signs of wisdom and maturity (Baars, 2012: 94–95). Both Plato and Aristotle considered wisdom as one of the most important human virtues that must be in harmony with reason and the order of the natural world (Grossman, 2020). As Grossman observes, for “Aristotle, as for Near Eastern thinkers millennia before him, wisdom was a key element on the path to achieving a good life, a path that required balance and moderation between extremes” (Grossman, 2020: n/p). However, for classic Greek culture, wisdom was not something people developed as a result of growing older, because it was “something to love and search for;” yet, the Greeks did not deny that this search was a same time, the memoir brings to life a classic but often forgotten figure of the mentor that is central to the scholarship of age(ing) studies and related disciplines (Casado-Gual et al., 2019). A close reading of the now-classic book from a perspective of literary gerontology reveals that the figure of mentor has an important influence of the author’s inner growth and personal development, who becomes more mature and grounded as the story develops. The success of the book may also reveal that Albom has learned how to find his inner voice and, in so doing, get closer to his true self and a better understanding of life, death and the process of growing older.

Narrative of mentorship and wisdom

The classic figure of the mentor is an old, patient, experienced and wise person who gives sound advice about how to lead a meaningful life (Casado-Gual et al., 2019; Guroian, 2008). Typically, the character of mentor initiates the mentorial relationship and “chooses the one whom he will mentor for reasons that are his own” (Guroian, 2008: 76–77). The notion and practice of mentoring has been studied in disciplines ranging from education to psychology, thus, making it an interdisciplinary concept (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017). Mentorship is understood as a developmental interaction and extended dialogue between a senior person and a junior protege for his personal or professional growth (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017). From a literary perspective, mentorship can be regarded as a “combination between knowledge and maturity in the (older) mentor figure [that] often crystallizes in what is commonly perceived as a model of ‘wisdom’,” and coincides with “the highly moral view of old age” (Casado-Gual, 2019: 87). Although mentorial relationships are a recurrent theme in various forms of popular culture and contemporary films, such as the 1988 American classic, Bull Durham (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017), the typical mentor figure is closely related to Ancient Greece and its philosophy.

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lifelong process (Baars, 2012: 125). Hence, the chances to become wiser increased with age and accumulated life experiences. Like ancient Greeks, scholars argue that having more knowledge does not mean being wise because wisdom must imply the capacity of introspection and retrospection (Randall, 2013; Randall & Kenyon, 2004). As age scholar Thomas R. Cole states, “a good old age requires growth, which requires conscious effort and intention” (Cole, 2020: 9). Relatively, Randall and Kenyon (2004) contend that wisdom is closely linked to the exploration of our own potential, limitations and the meaning of life, which is often distilled in first-person narratives. Since the acquisition of life experiences and wisdom is an ongoing process rather than an ultimate achievement, wisdom-and-aging-related stories are never static, but dynamic and always unfolding, as the process of aging per se.

The intersections of aging, the transmission of knowledge and the realm of narrative are present in Albom’s memoir, which depicts the mentorial relationship that an older character establishes with a younger figure. In his bestseller, the author brings to life the mentor figure—his favorite college professor, Morrie Schwartz, from almost twenty years ago. The young man calls him ‘coach’, while Morrie sees his former student as a ‘player’. In the book, Morrie embodies the classic figure of a wise old mentor, while Mitch represents a lost young man who is in search of guidance on how to lead his unsatisfied life. Even if Mitch is a very successful newspaper sports columnist for the Detroit Free Press, he has failed as a pianist. The shadow of this failure chases him throughout his unsuccessful life based on unfulfilling and money-driven routine. As the narrator states, “[m]y days were full, yet I remained much of the time, unsatisfied. What happened to me?” (Albom, 1997: 34, emphasis in original).

Yet, when the protagonist learns from a TV program that his beloved teacher at Brandeis University, aged seventy-eight, is dying from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis)—an “unforgiving illness of the neurological system”—, his life begins to change (Albom, 1997: 7). He travels from Michigan to Massachusetts to visit Morrie and their reunion becomes a series of meetings that take place every Tuesday by a window in the professor’s study. Although Mitch initiates the lost contact, it is the old professor who chooses the young man to be his mentee during the last days of his life. The protagonists gather in the final ‘class’, in which Mitch receives valuable lessons on the subject of the meaning of life and aging that he sees as the last gift of their time together. The fourteen Tuesdays become life lectures on a variety of topics, “including love, work, community, family, aging, forgiveness, and, finally, death” (Albom, 1997: 1). Yet, these lessons are not based on books or papers, but rather taught from experience at the university of life. There are neither grades nor formal tests, only oral exams—kissing the professor “good-bye earn[s] you an extra credit” (Albom, 1997: 1). Although there are no official examinations, the student is expected to “produce one long paper on what was learnt”, which is presented in memoir format (Albom, 1997: 2).

The life-changing sessions, told with flashbacks and references to contemporary occurrences, help the protégé explore his own potential and limitations and look at his life with introspection and retrospection in order to become “fully human” (Albom, 1997: 47). During their mentorial meetings, a young man realizes that his life is “a smokescreen” and that the secret is to start looking at it from a different angle with courage, openness and trust, just like the mentor did: “Morrie was looking at life from some very different place than anyone else I knew. A healthier place. A more sensible place. And he was about to die” (Albom, 1997: 127, 63, emphasis in original). Schwartz and Albom’s mentorial relationship can be considered as the professor’s love for his former student and the protégé’s love for his role model, who teaches him how to lead his life through adversities and vicissitudes. To guide his disciple, Morrie employs storytelling, a powerful mentoring tool and a mechanism for learning, which allows him to encourage Mitch to build his confidence and find a meaningful direction in life. As D’Abate and Alpert observe, personal stories “can enhance one’s perspective, change perceptions, or motivate the listener as they persuade and influence others, create community, transmit knowledge, and share wisdom” (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017: 4). Additionally, the scholars argue that the power of storytelling lies in its being emotional, memorable and inspirational, thus having a greater impact on listeners (D’Abate & Alpert, 2017: 10).

While Morrie becomes Mitch’s mentor for life, the latter turns out to be the professor’s helping hand to reach out to the world through his personal narrative, which he calls the “final thesis” narrated from experience (Albom, 1997: 191). The aging professor wants to get his “message to millions of people,” and Mitch is chosen as his faithful mentee and messenger: “I want someone to hear my story. Will you?” (Albom, 1997: 132, 63, emphasis in original). Morrie also resorts to storytelling as a coping mechanism to help him lead his last days in the most meaningful way possible. The mentor’s desire to share his final life lessons can be regarded as a healing and transformative act that allows him to counterweight his illness and the challenges of old age. Sharing one’s life story with others is especially significant since people organize their life experiences “through and into narratives, and assign meaning to them through storytelling” (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010: 2; Randall & Kenyon, 2004). Cohen (2010) notes that the willingness to share one’s life story becomes even more important as people grow older because they are more eager to relay what they have learned and lived through. Aging and a desire to tell one’s life story is also a transformative process that is closely related to the construction of self-identity and care, and is characterized by an increased self-assurance, a sense of wisdom and maturity, which allows to cope with vicissitudes of later life (Cole, 2020; Erikson, 1993; Vogel, 1995).

Morrie’s personal story also shows that individual development and the search for wisdom do not diminish, but, on the contrary, grow into old age, as believed in Ancient Greece. Yet, our individual narratives are always bound to other stories that become part of our personal experiences. As Randall and Kenyon state, “the material for our wisdom stories comes, of necessity, from our engagement with other people. Effectively, each of us is on a journey to her/his own wisdom story by way of other’s wisdom stories” (Randall & Kenyon, 2004: 341). These and similar ideas are also distilled in Cole’s recent book Old Man Country (Cole, 2020), in which he interviewed twelve celebrated American men, verging on the fourth age, about their search for wisdom and a good old life. Their personal narratives demonstrate the necessity to be listened to and understood as a way to assure their personhood and face the process of growing older, even if it is portrayed through negative lens in many contemporary societies.

*Ars vivendi and aging*

In western cultural understandings, old age is commonly perceived as a period of life in which there are fewer things to experience for the first time, and more things for the last time (Vischer, 1967). Older people are often seen from the lens of the narrative of decline that portrays them as weak, disengaged, asexual, asocial and child-like figures who have low self-esteem, no valuable contribution to society and even no ability to enjoy life (Gullette, 2004; Twigg, 2000). The many existing misconceptions and culturally constructed stereotypes about old age contribute to further marginalization and social exclusion of older individuals and, at the same time, reinforce the fear of reaching old

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2 With the emergence of modernity, the idea of good life was replaced by the notion of rationalist self-interest and functionality, which lead to decline of the fascination with wisdom (Grossman, 2020). Interest in wisdom and Greek philosophy did not reappear in mainstream philosophical circles until the 1970s, when a new focus on happiness and personal satisfaction was given a special attention, along with non-Western perspectives on life fulfillment and human values. As Grossman comments, “the scientific approach to wisdom has started to gain momentum only in the past few decades, around the time the world started to face rising social and climatic instabilities” (Grossman, 2020: 187).
age.

Mitch, in his early forties, is afraid of getting older and states that the fear of aging is “another of the issues on [his] what’s-bugging-my-genera-
tion list” (Albom, 1997: 117). However, the mentor teaches the disciple that old age should not be feared or regarded as a narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004), but appreciated and seen as an ongoing process of learning and becoming – “Mitch, I embrace aging” (Albom, 1997: 118, emphasis in original). According to Morrie, aging is as a life-long learning process that encompasses the transmission of wisdom and development of personal growth that grants new understandings about life and death:

It’s very simple. As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two, you’d always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It’s growth. It’s more than the negative you’re going to die, it’s also the positive that you understand you’re going to die, and that you live a better life because of it (Albom, 1997: 118, emphasis in original).

To Morrie, it makes no sense to be afraid of aging because it is an inevitable part of human nature: “[i]f you’re always battling against getting older, you’re always going to be unhappy, because it will happen anyhow” (Albom, 1997: 118–119). The professor also highlights that many people fear old age because they are leading unfulfilling lives that lack meaning, purpose and a sense of wholeness. According to him, many young people believe that by acquiring material goods they would stop the ravages of time and become happy, healthy and fulfilled: “the young are not wise. They have very little understanding about life. […] When people are manipulating you, telling you to buy this perfume and you’ll be beautiful, or this pair of jeans and you’ll be sexy – and you believe them! It’s such nonsense” (Albom, 1997: 118). The mentor is also skeptical about current self-help business that he sees as a persuasive advertisement strategy that does not allow us to find the true meaning in life: “America had become a Persian bazaar of self-help” (Albom, 1997: 65). Through his final narrative, Morrie wishes to make people aware that many of us lead unsatisfied and purposeless lives, brainwashed by constant repetition and consumerist, profit-driven lifestyles, which obstruct us from finding our inner selves. Instead of celebrating youth, Morrie proposes to embrace and celebrate old age with all its styles, which characterize the classic mentor figure. Mitch also learns another important lesson – that pain and grievance can be used to delve deeper into the complexities of life, and get a better understanding of the art of living and growing older. In fact, one of the most life-changing occurrences that prompts us to redefine our life goals and values is the confrontation with illness, caregiving and death.

The hardest life lessons

Textual representations can yield unique insights of personal crises and turning points, and show how people accommodate their developing sense of finitude as they grow older (Casado-Gual et al., 2016; McAdams, 1996; Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). As Wyatt-Brown contends, illnesses and deaths of family members and friends, along with changes in one’s body, are the major causes of “unsettled feelings” in later life, which have a great impact on our self-perception and personal growth (Wyatt-Brown, 2010: 58). Although growing older may allow for new vantage points, it also involves an increased dependency and caregiving. However, these aspects are rarely voiced because they represent the human ‘dirt’ and the ‘negativities of the body’ (Twigg, 2000). Moreover,
sagging and smelly aging bodies connect to the fear of aging and that of moral pollution, which does not fit with the model of successful aging and the ideals of contemporary society that enhances autonomy, youthful looks and self-management. Although carework is an integral part of growing older, a closer look at the negotiation of ill and frail aging bodies in need of care has been absent from gerontological studies, mainly focused on biological determinism and medical approaches (Twigg, 2000). It is only over the last twenty years that important theoretical and empirical research has been conducted on aging bodies in light of interdisciplinary biological, literary and sociocultural dimensions, which help better understand the complexities of aging from so-called midlife to deep old age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014; Twigg, 2000; Twigg & Martin, 2015).

In his memoir, Albom touches upon the unpleasant truths of corporeality and carework in later life. Instead of keeping care-related duties at bay and hiding them from the public eye, he exposes the deteriorating body of his mentor. Although, during his first days with Morrie, care difficulties and human wastes made Mitch embarrassed and silent, he has gradually learnt how to manage the ‘negativities of the body’. As he states, “that before would make me embarrassed or squeamish were now routinely handled” (Albom, 1997: 154). Mitch observes Morrie’s slow eating as if he were learning to eat for the first time: “I watch him now, his hands working gingerly, [...] he could not press down hard with a knife. His fingers shook. Each bite was a struggle” (Albom, 1997: 35). The young man also notices age spots on the mentor’s aging skin, which is loose and looks “like skin hanging from a chicken soup bone” (Albom, 1997: 35). Instead of hiding Morrie’s aging body, Albom describes it in detail in his book, which helps bring his readership closer to the realities of growing older:

The catheter bag, connected to the tube inside him and filled with greenish waste fluid, lay by my foot near the leg of his chair. A few months earlier, it might have disgusted me; it was inconsequential now. So was the smell of the room after Morrie has used his commode. [...] There was his bed, there was his chair, and that was his life. If my life were squeezed into such a thimble, I doubt I could make it smell any better (Albom, 1997: 154–155).

The mentee not only becomes more caring and less disgusted by old age smells and human dirt, but he also realizes the importance of proximity in later life. Mitch learns that the professor’s longing to be hugged and touched becomes more important as he comes closer to his final days. According to the protector, the necessity of human touch is even more crucial as he comes closer to his final days. According to the protector, the necessity of human touch is even more important as he comes closer to his final days. According to the protector, the necessity of human touch... But here’s the secret: in between, we need others as well (Albom, 1997: 157).

Mitt also observes that even if the mentor’s steady illness was “complete surrender to the disease” that made him “dependent on others for nearly everything”, he has learned to ignore culture that makes us fearful, yet, at the same time, eager to know how to walk their final steps: “[p]eople see me as a bridge. I am not as alive as I used to be, but I’m not yet dead. I’m sort of in-between. [...] I’m on the last great journey here – and people want me to tell them what to pack” (Albom, 1997: 32–33). However, according to the mentor, people “are so afraid of the sight of death” because they are not connected to the natural world and think that they are “something above nature” (Albom, 1997: 171, 173).

Morrie’s standpoint about death echoes Gullette’s (2018) observation that dying appears as one of the most mysterious and opaque human endeavors, and that living-with-dying is even more obscure, because we are disconnected from the experience of death. Gullette (2018) also notes that we are eager to learn about dying, especially, about living-with-dying, and are curious about what goes on in our minds and inner selves when we start facing our final days. However, what we...
know about mortality today emerges mostly from reading about death or from watching the dying of other people on TV screens. For instance, in the past thirty years, stories about dying and living with a terminal disease, which used to be quite rare and were mainly employed by religious writers in the seventeenth century, have become far more popular (Gullette, 2018). The disappearance of the presence of death and dead bodies from the public sphere, which occurred in the second half of the 20th century and was led by medical advances, bears witness to our incapability of dealing with painful, unpleasant, but real aspects of humanity, including aging and old age (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999). In fact, vulnerability and the visibility of death and bodily decline are taboo topics in contemporary cultures, especially in the U.S.A (Gullette, 2018). As American writer Erica Jong states, “[w]e have trouble with death. We think it’s un-American. We think it won’t catch us” (Jong, 2015: 134).

While Morrie becomes Mitch’s mentor, the approaching death can be regarded as Morrie’s own mentor in the last stages of his life. The hanging shadow of ALS is not only a reminder of death, but also a tough lecture that gives the professor the final lessons and provides him with new vantage points about ourselves. On the penultimate Tuesday, the old professor confesses that there is no way he is going back to his previous days, because he is a changed person: “I am a different self now. I’m different in my attitudes. I’m different appreciating my body, which I didn’t do fully before” (Albom, 1997: 175). As the teacher claims, knowing that you are going to die allows you to be better prepared and “more involved in your life while you’re living” (Albom, 1997: 81, emphasis in original). The mentor’s inner transformation and an enhanced sense of spiritual growth show that our dependency on others and the feeling of finitude are the causes of concern that make us wonder about our existence, provides us with new meanings of life and death, and influences the development of wisdom (Kenyon et al., 1999; Tornstam, 2005, 2011). The presence of mortality becomes a fundamental element in both Morrie and Albom’s own life trajectories because it allows them to experience life as a journey towards self-discovery from a more metaphysical perspective. As Kastenbaum argues, “life and death are so intimately entwined that knowledge of one requires knowledge of the other” (Kastenbaum, 2003: viii). Morrie teaches us that it is possible to “find the healing power in grieving” and the negativities of old age and living-with-dying (Albom, 1997: 86). According to the professor, people have to learn to dive deep into emotions and experience them fully to know what pain and love are.

During their Tuesday conversations, both the old man and the young man come to a realization that the meaning of life is connected to “love, responsibility, spirituality, awareness” (Albom, 1997: 180). For Morrie, love is the only pathway and the most important mentor for life that leads us to personal richness, meaningful life and the understanding of the complexity and beauty of life, even at the most difficult moments. As Cole highlights, in order to become our best selves, we need to “both resist and accept, even celebrate, the reality of our decline and dependence” (Cole, 2020: 167). He also states that meaning in life is “partly a matter of love and of relevance” – if we are loved and cared about by our family and friends, our lives have significance (Cole, 2020: 17). For Morrie, only by fully recognizing these feelings and detaching ourselves from them can we learn how to lead a meaningful life and become more human. Yet, according to the mentor, detachment is not about disconnecting, but about being completely immersed in the present moment and experiencing it to the fullest: “[a]nd this is where detachment begins in. […] I don’t want to leave the world in a state of flight. I want to know what’s happening, accept it, get to a peaceful place, and let go” (Albom, 1997: 106–107). To the professor, aging, like death, “is natural as life. It’s part of the deal we made”; thus, the mentor embraces it with wisdom and introspection in a holistic sense (Albom, 1997: 172). His thoughts about death echo Epicurus’ argument that as long as we are alive, death is not part of our lives, and when we die, we no longer exist; thus, there should be no fear of dying because, metaphysically, we are no more. As one of Cole’s interviewees, a famous television broadcaster Hugh Down said, “subjective death does not exist” – one cannot be dead, because dead is no longer a state of being, therefore, “there is no such thing as death” (Cole, 2020: 101).

Morrie Schwartz left this world conscious, serene and fully present in the very final moment. His peaceful death can be seen as the culmination of a well-lived, dignified and meaningful life in which there are no regrets or sorrows. Although the mentor died alone, he did not die lonely, for being alone was his preferred way of dying and a condition to a calm detachment from life. For Mitch, Morrie’s message was clear – only by knowing how to die can we learn how to lead a fulfilling life. The former student also realizes that even in old age “there is no such thing as ‘too late’” because the life journey is a never-ending transformation, transition and discovery that continues right up until the day we say good-bye (Albom, 1997: 190). As Randall and McKim (2008) state, as people grow older, they acquire a better comprehension of one’s self in relation to changing socio-cultural contexts; yet, it is not an ultimate accomplishment, but an endless life-long journey of becoming which goes hand in hand with the evolution of one’s identity, wisdom and inner growth. The mentor also teaches his disciple that even if death ends one’s life, it does not necessarily end a relationship that keeps us living in our deepest memories, thoughts and feelings: “[d]eath ends a life, not a relationship” (Albom, 1997: 174). Ultimately, Albom’s honest memoir also reveals that ars vivendi est ars moriendi is as much as ars moriendi est ars vivendi.

Conclusions

Mitch Albom, by narrating a personal story of a young man in search of the meaning in life, and a wise man facing his final life stage, revives the classic figure of the mentor who teaches us that the most difficult occurrences in life can reveal important aspects about the art of living, aging and dying. Morrie demonstrates to his former student that life can be enriching at any stage and that the fear of aging, dependency and dying should not be paralyzing, embarrassing or regarded as contagious, but rather seen as an opportunity for personal development. Instead of fading into invisibility, anxiety and despair, Morrie emerges as a teacher for life who shatters socially constructed notions associated with old age as a phase of inactivity, invisibility and a loss of manliness. In Albom’s autobiographical work, the process of growing older is not presented as the narrative of decline or successful aging, but is characterized by new understandings of life and a greater sense of wisdom, maturity and inner-growth. The author also demonstrates that personal narratives are valuable sources of insight into one’s self that help explore alternative ways to dealing with the dynamics of aging and losses.

Two decades after Morrie’s death, his lessons continue to teach new generations that only though the act of giving can we fully engage in life and keep our relationships alive. Albom’s memoir gives sound advice to both younger and older people about how to face age-related challenges and losses “with courage, with humor, [and] with composure” (Albom, 1997: 21). Mitch and Morrie’s mentorial relationships also confirms that as people grow older, their personal narratives, both joyful and painful, can serve as a guide for future generations to achieve a sense of wholeness and wisdom. More positive approaches and representations of older people are especially important since they have the power to shape our ideas about later life and have a significant impact on future generations. As Casado-Gual and colleagues argue, “mentoring is related to the transmission of knowledge, but also, especially within the field of aging studies, to the richness and depth that establishing solid relationships between generations may bring with it” (Casado-Gual et al., 2019: 16). Similarly, Guroian states that “[t]rue mentorship is vital to culture and the growth and flourishing of education and the arts, in particular. We need to recapture the pristine meaning of mentorship if for no others, then for our children” (Guroian, 2008: 77). Since bringing up a child well is crucial to any society, the figure of mentor becomes especially important because a young person “needs an older person endowed with both the right experience and willingness to assist and not harm” (Gullette, 2019: 69).
Morrie’s constructive approach towards aging, his fatal illness and, ultimately, his end of life, leaves an encouraging, loving and long-lasting impression on readers of different generations, who might regard him as their own literary mentor for life. As Albom states, “he was the father everyone wishes they had” and “the teacher to the last” to many (lost) people who look for a source of inspiration about how to lead a meaningful life (Albom, 1997: 138, 134). Through his later life narrative, Morrie tells us that we “all need teachers in our lives” who can guide us on how to best deal with the complexities of living and aging, and become aware that “love is how you stay alive, even after you are gone” (Albom, 1997: 65, 133).

In the afterward to commemorate the book’s 20th anniversary, the author reflects on the huge impact that his bestseller has had on his personal life and his readership since its original publication. Albom, now approaching Morrie’s age himself, highlights that it was not the fear of aging and dying that worried his professor most, but the fear of being forgotten and not needed. As the mentor stated, “[t]he way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning” (Albom, 1997: 43).

Perhaps this is why Mitch Albom, inspired by Morrie’s idea that ‘giving is living’, has not ceased to establish charities in the Detroit city and other places since the publication of his memoir. Albom’s founded charities, such as SAY DETROIT, cater for those who are in need of food, shelter, medical care, scholarships, and emotional and community support, and inspire others to volunteer on a regular basis. It could be argued that Mitch, as a Junior disciple, has internalized Morrie as a role model and imitated him in his later actions by helping those in need. Albom’s altruistic initiatives also echo Cole’s (2020) arguments that a meaningful life can be only constructed by devoting ourselves to service, mentoring and helping others grow intellectually, spiritually and personally. The feeling of being needed and not forgotten creates a sense of gratification and opens up new pathways to accept our “vulnerability as part of being human” and helps make a difference in the world (Cole, 2020: 166–167).

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References


