

FORUM

Whom will you meet in heaven?



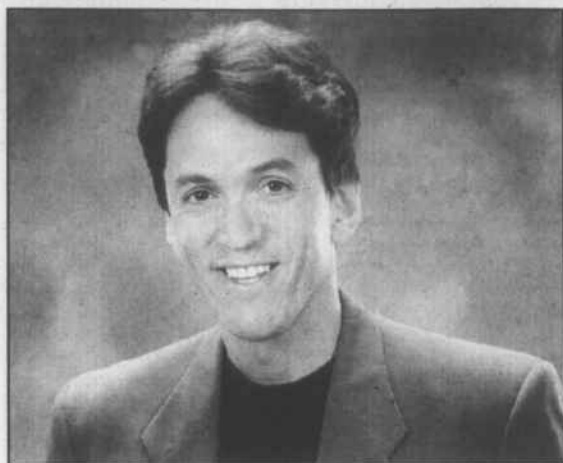
Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened."
— Unknown

"What five people do you think you will meet when you get to heaven?" I asked my wife recently, over dinner. She didn't waver at all. The first name out of her mouth was Jesse Lee Littlejohn, her mother. I'm looking forward to seeing her too. Next was her sister Frances, then a friend we graduated with from college, a cousin who lived across the street from her and her third-grade teacher.

The question had been on my mind after reading "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," by Mitch Albom. I recognized the author after the title of the book grasped my attention. Albom wrote the best seller "Tuesdays with Morrie," which chronicled the slow illness and death of his college professor and mentor Morrie Schwartz. I enjoyed reading that book and remembered sharing it with others. I was captivated by the title and had to pick up this new book and read it. It takes off where "Morrie" ends, looking at what happens after death.

"Who might I meet?" I wondered, reflecting on loved ones, friends and people I have come in contact with who have departed this earthly life. Like my wife, my mother is at the top of my list too, followed by my grandfather and mother-in-law. Another person would be a friend I went to high school with, played football with in



Author Mitch Albom

college and also was a fraternity brother, Charlie B. Dulin. He will probably be sitting in his white convertible with the top back, waiting. We spent a lot of time in that car. Who is number five? I don't know, probably someone I would least expect.

"The Five People You Meet in Heaven" is a novel, based on Albom's uncle Eddie. "He was a blue-collar worker his whole life," said Albom in an interview with Rebecca Phillips. "He felt that his life was insignificant." Eddie is also the name of the main character in the book, an 83-year-old amusement park maintenance man. From the opening chapter, an account of his last 90 minutes on earth is described, leading up to an accident that kills him.

He wakes up in heaven and all the pieces of his life come together after conversations with the people he might have expected to see and a few he was surprised to see. One of the lessons he learns is that he is

now one of five people responsible for sharing with another person upon their arrival in heaven.

There is responsibility after death too.

An incident in Albom's uncle Eddie's life provided the spark for the book. He remembers his uncle telling the story of being rushed to the hospital for open-heart surgery. According to Albom, "it was touch and go." His uncle "remembered waking up and rising and seeing all of his dead relatives sitting on the edge of his bed." That incident planted a thought with Albom that there was something else after death. His response to people who ask what he thinks will happen after death reflects his uncle's influence: "Well, I know there are people waiting for you because my uncle told me so."

There are several spiritual lessons in the book, according to Albom in the interview with Phillips. "We're all connected," he said. "Everybody affects everybody. We're all part of this

big life force."

I agree. There is a ripple effect to touching another person that leads to an impact on the life of someone else, who influences yet another. We are all interconnected, planting seeds that we may not see grow to maturity but may have influenced unknowingly. Here is a great line from the first person Eddie talks to when he arrives in heaven, the Blue Man: "You could no more separate one human being from another than you could separate a breeze from the wind."

The next lesson is that of asking questions such as "Why?" We want answers to the unexplainable. Why me? Why did he die so young? Why did my love one get sick? "We often die without these questions answered," Albom said. The book offers you something to think about: What if we get our questions answered in heaven from those people waiting for us to arrive?

And last but not least is a lesson worth understanding: "that love is a lot stronger than people realize and lost love is not wasted love." That is powerful, isn't it?

I loved the story and what it suggests: that it isn't over after death. It represents another beginning. There are people who have been connected to you, who influenced you or were touched by you during your lifetime, who have something to share with you about the meaning of your life.

Whom might you meet?

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Will the bombs explode in Havana?



Jesse Jackson
Guest Columnist

A car bomb kills six and wounds 35 in Baghdad. Al Qaeda is reportedly planning new assaults on the United States. Clearly Fidel Castro is in trouble. Fidel Castro? What does he have to do with Iraq and Osama bin Laden? Nothing, of course, but that may just be the point.

Bush's pre-emptive war on Iraq has led to an occupation that isn't going well. American casualties and suicides are up. The Army brass is in virtual public revolt, with half of our forces mired in Iraq, and brutally long assignments raising fears about re-enlistments and recruiting. Republicans are chafing at the \$87 billion Bush wants for next year in Iraq, building schools in Baghdad while school budgets are cut across the country. And the president's pre-war statements painting Iraq as an imminent threat to the United States have been exposed as false.

The administration's response to the debacle has been to roll out an aggressive public relations campaign. National Security Adviser Condi Rice is named head of a new coordinating structure (which Defense Secretary Don

Rumsfeld dismisses as paper shuffling). Bush, Cheney and Rice hit the airwaves to recycle increasingly threadbare justifications for the unilateral war. A form letter-to-the-editor praising U.S. efforts in Iraq is sent to newspapers as if written individually by U.S. soldiers, some of whom didn't even know about the letter until it appeared in print over their names.

Amid all this, the president appeared in the Rose Garden on Oct. 10 to announce a renewed offensive against Castro. "The Cuban regime," Bush warned, "will not change by its own choice." He announced a program "to hasten the arrival of a new, free, democratic Cuba." He ordered the Department of Homeland Security to increase inspections of travels and shipments to and from Cuba.

This is the same department that doesn't have the resources to inspect shipments coming in and out of the United States; the same department unable to afford training and equipment for our front-line defenders, local police and firefighters.

As the New York Times reported, it is easy to dismiss this as politics, a ploy to "shore up the president's support among Florida's Cuban-Americans." Bush needs Florida in 2004; Cuban-American votes are essential. So throw a stick and a few harsh words at Castro. Establish a

commission headed by the good soldier Secretary of State Colin Powell, his credibility already compromised over Iraq, and the Cuban-American Housing Secretary Mel Martinez to plan for "Cuba's transition from Stalinist rule to a free and open society" and to "identify ways to hasten the arrival of that day." Ratchet up the failed 40-year embargo that, if anything, has only consolidated Castro's nationalist credentials.

But there is a more ominous possibility. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan, despite the skepticism of the professional military, dispatched U.S. forces to Lebanon and started lobbing artillery into the civil war there. A shocking terrorist attack killed more than 200 foolishly exposed U.S. soldiers. Reagan figured he better change the subject. Suddenly the little island of Grenada became a threat to freedom in the hemisphere. An armada and U.S. troops were dispatched to invade the tourist paradise and overthrow the rowdy nationalists that had taken over. U.S. troops got out of Lebanon under the cover of victory in Grenada. American students studying in Grenada were "rescued," bolstering President's Reagan's polls, if not his credibility.

Now in Iraq, much of the professional military wants the administration to put Iraqis in charge, and get U.S.

troops out of there as fast as possible. That won't be easy, given the chaos that we'd leave behind in a critical region. The administration is pushing to make it work in Iraq.

But if what the military is now calling a "classic guerilla war" continues to escalate, if U.S. troops continue to die in an occupation for which they are not trained, the president's political operatives will be looking for a way out and a little cover. Iran might be too dangerous. But with Castro now 77, the Cuban economy ground down from mismanagement and from the embargo, the Cuban people increasingly restless, Florida in play in 2004, Cuba just might be auditioned as a modern-day Grenada.

The Cuba experts I've talked with are skeptical. Cuba is just too tough. Castro still has too much support. The international community would be outraged. They are probably right. But if the president isn't cooking up a crisis over Cuba, why are we spending the resources of the already overwhelmed Department on Homeland Security inspecting shipments going in and out of Cuba rather than those coming in and out of the United States?

Jesse L. Jackson Sr. is founder and president of the Chicago-based Rainbow/Push Coalition.



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617 N. Liberty Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27101

The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc.

The Chronicle is a proud member of National Newspapers Publishers Association • North Carolina Press Association • North Carolina Black Publishers Association • Inland Press Association

National Advertising Representative:
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc., 45 West 45th Street, New York, NY 10036 212 / 869-5220

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Copy Editor 723-8448

Circulation 722-8624

Sales Staff 722-8628

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