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### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why would such a group have the rituals described by Miner?
2. Who are the Nacirema? Can you say for sure?

MITCH ALBOM

## We Talk About Our Culture

"Hit him harder."

I slapped Morrie's back.

"Harder."

I slapped him again.

"Near his shoulders . . . now down lower."

Morrie, dressed in pajama bottoms, lay in bed on his side, his head flush against the pillow, his mouth open. The physical therapist was showing me how to bang loose the poison in his lungs—which he needed done regularly now, to keep it from solidifying, to keep him breathing.

"I . . . always knew. . . you wanted. . . to hit me. . ." Morrie gasped.

Yeah, I joked as I rapped my fist against the alabaster skin of his back. This is for that B you gave me sophomore year! *Whack!*

We all laughed, a nervous laughter that comes when the devil is within earshot. It would have been cute, this little scene, were it not what we all knew it was, the final calisthenics before death. Morrie's disease was now dangerously close to his surrender spot, his lungs. He had been predicting he would die from choking, and I could not imagine a more terrible way to go. Sometimes he would close his eyes and try to draw the air up into his mouth and nostrils, and it seemed as if he were trying to lift an anchor.

Outside, it was jacket weather, early October, the leaves clumped in piles on the lawns around West Newton. Morrie's physical therapist had come earlier in the day, and I usually excused myself when nurses or specialists had business with him. But as the weeks passed and our time ran down, I was increasingly less self-conscious about the physical

embarrassment. I wanted to be there. I wanted to observe everything. This was not like me, but then, neither were a lot of things that had happened these last few months in Morrie's house.

So I watched the therapist work on Morrie in the bed, pounding the back of his ribs, asking if he could feel the congestion loosening within him. And when she took a break, she asked if I wanted to try it. I said yes. Morrie, his face on the pillow, gave a little smile.

"Not too hard," he said. "I'm an old man."

I drummed on his back and sides, moving around, as she instructed. I hated the idea of Morrie's lying in bed under any circumstances (his last aphorism, "When you're in bed, you're dead," rang in my ears), and curled on his side, he was so small, so withered, it was more a boy's body than a man's. I saw the paleness of his skin, the stray white hairs, the way his arms hung limp and helpless. I thought about how much time we spend trying to shape our bodies, lifting weights, crunching sit-ups, and in the end, nature takes it away from us anyhow. Beneath my fingers, I felt the loose flesh around Morrie's bones, and I thumped him hard, as instructed. The truth is, I was pounding on his back when I wanted to be hitting the walls. . . .

Morrie believed in the inherent good of people. But he also saw what they could become.

"People are only mean when they're threatened," he said later that day, "and that's what our culture does. That's what our economy does. Even people who have jobs in our economy are threatened, because they worry about losing them. And when you get threatened, you start looking out only for yourself. You start making money a god. It is all part of this culture."

He exhaled. "Which is why I don't buy into it."

I nodded at him and squeezed his hand. We held hands regularly now. This was another change for me. Things that before would have made me embarrassed or squeamish were now routinely handled. 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 had used the commode. He did not have the luxury of moving from place to place, of closing a bathroom door behind him, spraying some air freshener when he left. 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.

"Here's what I mean by building your own little subculture," Morrie said. "I don't mean you disregard every rule of your community. I don't go around naked, for example. I don't run through red lights. The little things, I can obey. But the big things—how we think, what we value—those you must choose yourself. You can't let anyone—or any society—determine those for you.

"Take my condition. The things I am supposed to be embarrassed about now—not being able to walk, not being able to wipe my ass, waking up some mornings wanting to cry—there is nothing innately embarrassing or shaming about them.

"It's the same for women not being thin enough, or men not being rich enough. It's just what our culture would have you believe. Don't believe it."

I asked Morrie why he hadn't moved somewhere else when he was younger.

"Where?"

I don't know. South America. New Guinea. Someplace not as selfish as America.

"Every society has its own problems," Morrie said, lifting his eyebrows, the closest he could come to a shrug. "The way to do it, I think, isn't to run away. You have to work at creating your own culture.

"Look, no matter where you live, the biggest defect we human beings have is our shortsightedness. We don't see what we could be. We should be looking at our potential, stretching ourselves into everything we can become. But if you're surrounded by people who say 'I want mine now,' you end up with a few people with everything and a military to keep the poor ones from rising up and stealing it."

Morrie looked over my shoulder to the far window. Sometimes you could hear a passing truck or a whip of the wind. He gazed for a moment at his neighbors' houses, then continued.

"The problem, Mitch, is that we don't believe we are as much alike as we are. Whites and blacks, Catholics and Protestants, men and women. If we saw each other as more alike, we might be very eager to join in one big human family in this world, and to care about that family the way we care about our own.

"But believe me, when you are dying, you see it is true. We all have the same beginning—birth—and we all have the same end—death. So how different can we be?"

"Invest in the human family. Invest in people. Build a little community of those you love and who love you."

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He squeezed my hand gently. I squeezed back harder. And like that carnival contest where you bang a hammer and watch the disk rise up the pole, I could almost see my body heat rise up Morrie's chest and neck into his cheeks and eyes. He smiled.

"In the beginning of life, when we are infants, we need others to survive, right? And at the end of life, when you get like me, you need others to survive, right?"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "But here's the secret: in between, we need others as well."

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In following Morrie's advice, how would one go about "creating his or her own culture"?
2. What point is Morrie making about similarity between people? Why is this important in culture?