

# Do Well But Do Good



Bruce W. Neckers

**M**other Teresa provided an “instruction” manual for how to best live one’s days on this Earth. She said:

*Do something for someone else. . . . Something that goes beyond the reach of a gift and into the category of sacrifice.*

As I near the back door of this profession that some are just entering, it has become increasingly clear to me that the accumulation of things and status, the driving force behind much of the energy of our civilization and profession, is highly overrated.

Mitch Albom’s little book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, has rested atop the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years. A quick read, it carries a profound message. Albom, the award-winning sports columnist for the *Detroit Free Press*, tells of his successful effort to rekindle his relationship with his college sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz. As Morrie faced impending death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s Disease, Albom re-established contact with him

and visited him every Tuesday. The lessons Mitch learned during those sessions are chronicled in the book and suggest that Morrie’s most important lessons were taught after he was too ill to stand in front of a classroom.

Morrie lived in the same house in his last days as he occupied for decades. Nothing was really new about it. An old black and white TV, well worn dishes, silverware and linens were all Morrie and his wife, Charlotte, needed. What the home lacked in physical possessions, Morrie filled with love, wisdom, and healthy doses of commentary on the American scene.

Mitch quotes Morrie:

*We’ve got a form of brainwashing going on in our country. Owning things is good, more money is good, more property is good, more commercialism is good. More is good. More is good. We repeat it over and over until nobody bothers to ever think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all of this, he has no perspective on what’s really important anymore.*

*Money is not a substitute for tenderness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. When you most need it, neither money, nor power will give you the feeling you are looking for, no matter how much of them you have.*

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Morrie suggested to Mitch:

*Devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to the community around you and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.*

*When you most need it, neither money, nor power will give you the feeling you are looking for, no matter how much of them you have.*

As Morrie lay dying, he said nothing about the acquisition of things or doing well financially. Morrie wasn’t a lawyer, but if he were, he would have followed the advice of the late and well-respected Grand Rapids lawyer, Tom McNamara, who predicted that we would not spend our

last days talking about billed hours or time spent in the office.

At my daughter Melissa’s graduation, the Dean of the Marquette University Law School, Howard Eisenberg, gave a short graduation speech entitled, “Do well and do good.”

Dean Eisenberg acknowledged that during the three years he had known the assembled graduates, he learned from them that some had come to law school so that they could do well economically. Law students and pre-law students read the statistics too. There is money to be made in this profession and, said Dean Eisenberg, “For those who seek an opportunity to do well, I hope you succeed, but neither your success nor your happiness can be measured unless you also do good.”

When we became members of the legal profession, we took an oath. The oath requires us to live and practice law within the Code of Professional responsibility. Ethics, as I understand the term, is a higher calling than the Code of Professional Responsibility. The Code *requires* us to do certain things. It is what we *must* do—the minimum standard.

Ethics, on the other hand, is what we *should* do because it is right.

In part, I believe that the burnout and loss of idealism that afflicts so many in our profession could be avoided by seeking to do good in the regular course of business instead of simply seeking to do well. Doing good is more satisfying than doing only what we must do to close a case and earn a fee. Fortunately, doing well and doing good are not mutually exclusive options. John Berry, the Bar's executive director, who is also a nationally-recognized leader in professional ethics, has a very clear-headed and practical understanding of this. An essential role of a mandatory bar association, he is fond of saying, is to help lawyers do well so that they have the ability and opportunity to do good.

The exhortation to do well and do good is not disjunctive, nor is it sequential. It is easy to promise ourselves that we will do good later, after we have accomplished the business of doing well. But postponing doing good is a dangerous trap. It can rob us of the joy of satisfaction and meaning in our daily professional lives. And, of course, "later" may never come.

In another time and place, the wisest and richest person in the land, King Solomon, wrote to his generation of youth:

*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.*

The same message, so simple yet so profound, resonates from the time of King Solomon through this very day. It is identical to the message whispered by a dying Morrie Schwartz, and it is the same call to action uttered by Mother Teresa. It is the message son Bill sent so poignantly to his dad, Jim Brickley, at the former Chief Justice's memorial service last month: thanks, Dad, for leaving us your good name. It is easy to blame our fast-paced life of cell phones, faxes, and e-mail for our difficulty in heeding this piece of wisdom, but if truth be known, I suspect that human nature simply has a propensity for distraction which manifests itself differently in each age and culture. Hence the need for King Solomon and wise elders throughout the ages to speak up and remind us of what's important.

When all is said and done, our lives are not enriched by leading the pack with billable hours or the acquisition of things. Understanding that a good name is better than riches—that devotion to loving others, the community around us, and serving the public gives our professional lives meaning and purpose—is the cure for our cynicism and disenchantment. Sacrificial giving—going the extra mile for a client, giving of ourselves when a fee will not result—brings more satisfaction with those things we must do to earn a living and maintain our professional responsibilities.

Although many lawyers do find a way to live the message and practice the art of doing good on a regular basis, for most of us it is a constant struggle to "stay on message." Nevertheless, I believe it is a message we hunger for. Even before September 11, the great success of Mitch Albom's slender book about Morrie was clear evidence of that proposition.

Since September 11, the priorities of all Americans have become clearer. The terrorists who struck the World Trade Center chose it as a target because for them it symbolized a society they believe to be obsessed with and corrupted by material gain. In this, as in so much else, they were wrong. Morrie was right: we are indeed inundated by commer-

cial messages that can add up to a form of brainwashing. But materialism does not define this country's soul. As a nation we are not mourning the businesses lost, the trade disrupted, the commercial real estate obliterated. We know how to pick up the pieces and take care of business, and we will. Rather, we are mourning human lives cut short, suddenly and swiftly.

If our enemies would read the poignant sketches of the victims that run daily in the *New York Times*, they would learn that we do not grieve the loss of bond traders, lawyers, accountants, vice presidents, service representatives, police officers, and firefighters. Instead, we mourn the loss of loving fathers and mothers, caring children of elderly parents, devoted friends, treasured siblings, church leaders, amateur thespians, weekend athletes, class clowns, and Little League coaches. We celebrate the ways in which the victims led rich and whole lives for as long as they were given, and we honor their sacrifices and kindnesses, not how much they were worth or their professional status.

As trained practitioners of civilization's most essential profession, we have much to give in the wholeness of our lives, for as long as we are given. Do well, but do good. And do it now. ♦