

## CONCORD BRIDGE

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‘All endings are also beginnings’  
The Five People You Meet in Heaven *by Mitch Albom*

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In his profound bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom offers insight into one of life’s most difficult issues: death. His new book, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, is a fascinating revelation of the intrinsic value of human life. He grapples with meaning and human understanding, and he imparts a genuine and humble wisdom from which we can all learn.

In the novel, one man’s experience is examined through a variety of lenses. It is the story of Eddie, an 83 year-old amusement park maintenance worker “with a barrel chest and a torso as squat as a soup can,” and his journey through a seemingly insignificant life, a tragic death, and an intense introspection during his afterlife. It is there where Eddie discovers the often unrealized impact his actions had on those around him, and three interwoven stories of Eddie’s life portray the unexpected connections of the human experience. The book’s account of one life is really an exploration of each of our lives and how each of us has our own story and our own understanding of life’s most pressing challenges.

“There are no random acts,” Albom writes, “we are all connected. You can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind.”

And this is the brilliance of the novel.

Eddie’s life was no different from any other. In his daily routine of work, loneliness and regret, he is haunted by the days that were, and the things that could have been. He is disillusioned in his old age, holding onto what he has lost and never remembering all he has gained and all he has done. He is so caught up in the past that he fails to understand the present and strive toward the future.

That is, until he gets to heaven.

See, Eddie’s accomplishments were not what we would call heroic. As a kid, he was the tough guy who hospitalized those he encountered in fist fights. In war, he was the soldier who fought bravely and even won medals, but injured his leg in a fight with one of his own men. And for decades, he was the embittered veteran who had dreams and aspirations and died having never chased a single one of them.

But it is the subtle glimpses of generosity that made Eddie a hero: the pipe-cleaner rabbits he made for little girls at Ruby Pier amusement park; the sacrifice he made for others; the patience and the work-ethic he bestowed upon those around him; the undaunted courage he displayed in dying to save a little girl from a falling piece of machinery. And it is in his heaven – where he begins to finally understand all that has happened in his life – where he finds peace.

He learns that life is not only about one's successes, but rather that the human experience is all encompassing. It is about the mistakes and the shortcomings too. It is about the invaluable lessons we can learn from each and every time we fall short. It is about recognizing the times we think we have failed when we have really succeeded. And, perhaps most importantly, it is about understanding that each of our actions has an immense and profound impact on those around us, and that we have an ethical responsibility to recognize this effect and to act accordingly.

This is the big lesson in life, the lesson that Eddie learns after he dies.

He learns about love, and that memory is something to cherish. "Life has to end," Alбом writes, "Love doesn't."

He learns about anger. "It eats you from inside. We think that hating is a weapon that attacks the person who harmed us. But hatred is a curved blade. And the harm we do, we do to ourselves."

He learns about sacrifice, that it is not only "a part of life," but that it is "something to *aspire* to."

And he learns about aging and the process of growing up and growing old. Perspectives change, Eddie discovers, and that is perhaps one of the most difficult lessons to appreciate. "Parents rarely let go of their children, so children let go of them... The moments that used to define them – a mother's approval, a father's nod – are covered by moments of their own accomplishments. It is not much later, as the skin sags and the heart weakens, that children understand; their stories, and all their accomplishments, sit atop the stories of their mothers and fathers."

These are the lessons that come with age, the secrets that only maturity allows us to discover. Some people, such as Eddie, never really come to understand. Others, the vast majority of us, understand far too late.

The book ends with the idea that each life affects every other and that while we often may not realize the impact of every action, the human experience is shared. We are all free to act as we choose, and there are very real consequences to our decisions. "The world is full of stories," Alбом writes, eloquently culminating the book, "but the stories are all one."

This novel reflects a lesson that we should all be so lucky to learn.