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News that Inspires

The 'Magic Strings' of Mitch Albom
by Knowledge@Wharton

In a new novel, The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto, Mitch Albom, bestselling author of Tuesdays with Morrie and The Five People You Meet in Heaven, tells the story of a guitarist who can change people's lives through the power of his musical talent. Albom recently was a guest lecturer in the Authors@Wharton series. While Albom was on campus, Wharton management professor Adam M. Grant spoke with him about why he wrote the book, his choice to pursue writing, and how we can each discover and share our greatest talent.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Adam Grant: What inspired you to write the latest book?

Mitch Albom: Ever since I wrote Tuesdays with Morrie, I've had people who have said to me, "That book changed my life." You actually said it to me not too long ago. I have to say, the first hundred times that that happened, I probably internally rolled my eyes and said, "Well, that's nice, but a book doesn't change your life. It's a book." Having heard it so many times at this point, I started to think, well, actually people's gifts do change other people's lives. I got intrigued about maybe writing a story about how that would happen. I had always been a musician. I buried it after I became a writer, but my real dream was to be a musician, and I worked at it when I was younger.

I came up with a story about a fictional guitar player named Frankie Presto, who is the greatest guitar player to ever walk the earth. The music gods have just chosen him to be their vessel. He suffers as a child. He's an orphan, and he goes through a lot of abandonment. As a result, he's rewarded with this magic guitar when he's nine years old that has six strings that are able to change people's lives. Over the course of his life, which traverses through … the real 20th century of music — Duke Ellington and Elvis Presley, and Woodstock and all the rest — he gets these opportunities to play so brilliantly that he actually changes somebody's life. When he does, the string turns blue and then it dissipates and disappears, and then he has five left and four left and three left and two left….

But the metaphor and the point behind it is that everybody gets a blue string in life. They have a gift, and if they share that gift with somebody, they can actually change somebody else's life. You became a professor and now you teach, and I'm sure some students along the line have said, "you know what, I want to do what he does," or "he made this clear to me that I want to now pursue that." You have, as a professor, changed somebody's life with your particular gift of teaching. I've written books, and people say, "Oh, that's

changed my life." A pianist could give a performance and someone in the audience could say "my God, that music, I want to make that music myself," and now they want to become a pianist. All of us have this ability to play a blue string. I just thought that that was an interesting theme to write a book about.

Grant: It's fascinating. It makes me wonder, how do you think about discovering what that gift is?

Albom: That's a very good question because I think a lot of people have gifts that they deny. They want to be something other than what their gift is. Or they see that their gift is not satisfying enough. So what that I'm good at music, I want to be a baseball player; or so what that I'm good at sports, I really want to be this. Or this gift doesn't make me enough money or this gift doesn't get me famous. But I think that people [should] recognize that everybody has a talent of some kind.

The narrator is music itself. He comes at the beginning of the book to take the talent out of Frankie Presto's body because he just died. He's going to take the talent out, and he's going to distribute it over other souls. Music explains how talents work: When you come out of the womb, before you ever even open your eyes, you're an infant. There's all these colors that you can actually see: bright, brilliant colors.

When you clench your fists for the first time, you're actually grabbing the colors that appeal to you and taking them, and those become your talents. Why does one kid grow up to have a great aptitude for math and another kid grows up as a great dancer, and another kid just is naturally musical?… In the book, the talent comes from … what you grab…. If you allow yourself to explore your talent and develop your talent, and not be jealous of other people's talents but just say, "This is what I do well, let me do it well," you will be at peace with your talent and you'll be effective with it.

Grant: Talk to us about this in your own life. We have millions of readers who are grateful that you walked away from music. But what was that decision process like, and why did you come back to it?

Albom: That's a perfect example. First of all, before I ever became a musician, I was one of those kids who did well in school. I got good grades. Naturally your parents say, "You should be a doctor, you should be a lawyer." Many kids at the same level with me went on and did that. Many of them have proven to be quite unhappy because that's not really where their talent lies, that's not really where their gifts were, but that's what society told them to do or somebody else told them to do. I was blessed that, despite the fact that my parents wanted me to go through those things, I said, "No, I feel music. I want to do music." So I pursued music. Music didn't really work out for me. I volunteered for a local newspaper writing stories. The very first day I wrote a story, I had never written anything before. I had no training, but I must have had some kind of aptitude for storytelling because I wrote a newspaper story about parking meters. That was my first assignment, for a local rag that they gave out in the supermarket….

They put it on the bottom of the front page when it came out the next week, and I went to the supermarket [to see it]. I picked it up, I saw my name, I saw the print after it, and something clicked in in me. There's almost a shiver. I still get a little goose bump when I tell the story. Okay, this is where I'm supposed to be. It's creative, like music.

But I can use words, and my brain is kind of coming into it. I settled into it, and I found out this is my aptitude. Now, do I still love music? Of course, I do. Did I just write a book about

music? Yes, I did. But did I have to recognize that, well, I may have wanted that, but I've got an ability here, and if I cultivate this, it can be just as satisfying, maybe more so, than the music career. I lucked out. I was able to stumble upon mine. But I think everybody has that, if they can do that search.

Grant: Your career trajectory since then has been so interesting: an award-winning sports journalist, then writing memoirs, then turning to fiction. You're at least trilingual as an author. When I think about leadership I think that a lot of leaders are fiction authors in the sense that they have to create a vision that doesn't yet exist. That they have to craft a narrative or tell a story that hasn't been told before. As a gifted storyteller, what advice can you offer to leaders about how to create better and more compelling narratives?

Albom: There's the joke that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. I think the one that came before it was storytelling. The reason that I never fear when they say journalism or print journalism is dead is that the world has always told stories, and it will always have to tell stories. The first thing I would say to leaders of any kind is everyone can relate to a story, and if you learn how to tell a story, whether that is your vision for a company, or just a way to be empathetic toward your customers or a way to just understand the world, if you put it in a storytelling form, as opposed to a didactic, factual PowerPoint presentation, everyone will be able to relate to it.

I have an orphanage that I run down in Haiti. I go every month. The kids' [first] language is not English. First they speak Creole, and then they speak French, and then we teach them English. So we're slowly getting into it. When I stand in the middle of the group of kids, and I try to relate some kind of story, you can see that they're looking at me, but they don't necessarily understand what I'm saying…. But when I start to move my hands, and my inflection reflects happy and then angry and then sad, they come alive. If I'm telling a story with that kind of stuff, even if they don't get the words, you can tell that they're intrigued by whatever story I'm telling, because it's got all the elements of story: narrative, emotion, a give and a take, conflict and all the rest of it.

Sometimes leaders should remember that it may be important to you [to] just spit the facts out, but one of the best ways to relate to somebody is not to lecture them, but to tell them a story. I always found that if I was trying to make a point about something, [that was helpful. You can say,] "here's the simplest thing in sports: The baseball player hits .333." That's a fact, right? Baseball player hits .333. Or [you can say], "one out of every three times that he comes to the plate, something good happens." Which tells you more, which intrigues you more about the baseball player? It's the same fact, but if you tell it in a little bit of a narrative, now you've engaged somebody that way. Leadership should probably keep that in mind.

Grant: How do we know when a story is worth telling, or when we're on to a compelling narrative?

Albom: Some of it is, if it's a passion to you then it will be for someone else. There is no empirical litmus test, I don't think, about whether a story is interesting or not. I've heard people tell stories about the invention of a chemical compound and hold people's attention, and I've heard other people tell a war story and put people to sleep. So it has a lot to do with the passion of the storyteller.

Grant: What does your creative process look like?

Albom: I'm pretty predictable, and I know sometimes there's this notion that writers just

get hit with lightning in the middle of the night, and they get up and they start scribbling, and next thing you know, they've got a novel. But I have to say that that's not really the case in my experience, with me or with most writers that I know who make a living at this.

I get up every morning about the same time. I follow a very similar pattern. I get up, brush my teeth, say a prayer, grab a cup of coffee and go downstairs and I start writing. I don't read anything else. I don't look at anything else. I don't listen to anything else. I don't turn on a television. I have no input. I want my brain to be a blank slate, as close as it can be, and then I begin to fill up that slate with the words and the creativity. I work for maybe from about 6:45 in the morning to maybe 9:30, 9:45, and I'm done. I recognize that I can sit at the computer for 10 more hours. I'm not going to get anything better. I know when to stop. I'm out of gas. Then I come back the next day. But I do it every day, except when I'm out on a book tour like this, and then it's almost impossible. I do it seven days a week.

I try never to quit when things are going badly. I guess this is a good lesson no matter what walk of your life you're in, because no matter what, there's always going to be an end of the day for you, whatever that end of the day is going to be. Mine is this run-out-of-gas point. But if you stop when you're in the middle of something that's not going well, and you say, "ah, I'll come back tomorrow. These sentences just aren't working. I'll go out when I'm fresh tomorrow." When you get up the next day, you are not excited about going back down to that computer because that problem is down there waiting for you. On the other hand, if you quit in the middle of a sentence that's just great, you say, "stop," then you can't wait to get back to it the next morning. That's probably a good philosophy all across the board.

Grant: If I heard you correctly, you write less than three hours a day, typically…. That's remarkable.

Albom: They say the average American in an eight-hour day only actually does between two and two and a half hours of real work, and the rest is emailing and phone calls and coffee breaks and daydreaming. If you applied that principle to my writing hours, it's concentrated writing. I don't veer off.

But creativity is funny that way. It's a little bit like Play-Doh. You can mold it into different shapes or different hours of your day, but you only still have as much Play-Doh as you have. You can stretch it out, and you can sit at a typewriter, like I say, for 10 hours, and you'll get the same amount of Play-Doh stretched out, or you could compress it and do it in two and a half. I have to say it's not a surprising pattern for most writers.

To most of the novelists I know, first of all, they all treat it like a job. You know, get up, go some place. A lot of people have separate offices from their home because they don't want to mix the environments. I know some writers who actually go to an office building and sit with other writers, one at a desk, and one at a desk, and they all work on their own novels together. These are fiction writers. But they want it to feel like a job, which is ironic, because a lot of people who have those kind of jobs, dream about, if I could just be a novelist and I could sit at home and smoke my pipe and write my thing and look at the ocean.

But a lot of people who have that option choose to come into an office. I have a separate office downstairs below everything, so that there's no traffic and no normal life. Otherwise, I might do the same thing. I've also found that if the view is too nice, you don't focus on your work. I'm blessed to live in an area that has a nice woods and everything that I can look at, and I always position everything away from it so I'm not distracted.

Grant: How do the stories you tell shape your own identity, as you write a book or a column that you spend a lot of time on. Does it change the way you think about who you are?

Albom: No…. For example, I wrote Tuesdays with Morrie to pay Morrie's medical expenses. It wasn't supposed to be a big book. It wasn't supposed to be a philosophical book. Nobody even wanted to publish it. I got turned down 90% of the places I went. They said, "You're a sports writer. It's depressing. Nobody wants to read anything like that." But I pushed forward because I wanted to pay his medical bills before he died, and that's what we did.

Now, what changed for me was, when I was visiting with Morrie — the transformation that I went through and the lessons that I learned, and then I put that down on the page. But what changed as a result of the book wasn't my writing of the story, because that had already happened to me. It was the reception to the book.

I had sent Amy Tan, who wrote The Joy Luck Club and is a friend of mine, the manuscript for Tuesdays with Morrie because she was one of the only people I knew who dealt in that area a little bit. Most of the people I knew were sports writers. I said, "what do you think? Do I have anything here? I've never written a book like this." She read it and she said, "I'm going to tell you two things. Number one, this is a wonderful book, and it's going to be really big," which I didn't believe at the time. And she said, "number two, you're about to become everybody's rabbi."

I had no idea what that meant, but I sure do now, because everyone who has ever dealt with a terminal illness, ALS or whoever comes through my path, wants to talk to me, wants to hear what I have to say, wants to share a story with me, which is fine. It's been a blessing. But it does change the conversations you have and the way that people look at you. What they look for from you has changed, and has changed with every book, really.

Grant: What was the biggest impact that Tuesdays with Morrie had on you? If you think about it … there are so many inspiring lessons in that book. What was the one that has really stuck with you the most?…

Albom: Personally, I think the way that Morrie would say, "Don't buy the culture if you don't like it." I saw that he was able to be sort of countercultural himself. He wasn't a radical. There were just certain things that he didn't care for, he didn't buy into. He died quite contentedly, albeit with the worst disease you could ever imagine.

I saw that. I said, "okay." That's always stuck with me. There's a lot of things that I just don't get into in American life that everybody gets into, like reality TV. For me, I don't even have an opinion on it because it's nonexistent for me. I don't allow it to become part of my life. I don't know any of these people. I know who the Kardashians are because you can't live in this country and not know who they are, but I don't know which one is which. And it's fine.

I push a lot of that stuff to the side. Other parts of the culture, I embrace. I learned that from Morrie. I think that's why I've been able to do as much as I've been able to do. I don't feel obligated to play on every field, just the ones that interest me and I think I can make a difference in.

Professionally, Tuesdays with Morrie took me off of a path of pure sports writer ambition

and plopped me into a whole different world. The best way I can think of this is when I was a sportswriter solely, people would stop me maybe in the airports if they recognized me, and they'd say, "hey, who's going to win the Super Bowl?" I learned from Chuck Daly, the coach of the Pistons, he would always say, "answer 'em, but never stop moving your feet. Keep moving your feet." So I'd say, "Patriots," and just keep walking.

Then after Tuesdays with Morrie came out, people would stop me in the airport, and they'd say, "You know my mother just died from ALS. Can I talk to you about it for a second?" Well, you can't go, "Patriots." You have to stop, and you have to engage. Consequently, I have heard so many stories. What it did for me, Adam, is it developed a sensitivity to the suffering in the world and the pain in the world that I did not have before that. I remember a few years after Tuesdays with Morrie going to football games and beginning to look at the crowds that I would be sitting amongst. I always work amongst 60,000 70,000, 80,000 people. That's a common office for me. I would look at the crowd, and I'd say, "At least half of those people who are jumping up and down and screaming have lost somebody in their life in the last six months and have a sad story to tell."

Grant: Wow.

Albom: I started to realize how many people are just walking around with these stories, and then all of a sudden I hear them. Because I'm the guy who they can tell them to. So it's made me sensitive to that and recognize that you can't just judge somebody by whatever expression they happen to have on their face or [whether] they're yelling or they're laughing. Everybody walks around with some heartbreak in their soul, and some more than others.