

AN ANALYSIS OF AUTHOR MITCH ALBOM— SETTING THE SCENE

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John Cheever in criticizing another author reportedly said: “You might say that he had lost the gift of evoking the perfumes of life: sea water, the smoke of burning hemlock, and the breasts of women. He had damaged...the ear’s innermost chamber, where we hear the heavy noise of the dragon’s tail moving over the dead leaves.”

My objective is to focus on the use of patterns of descriptions authors use in bringing the reader into their world the ones where “we hear the heavy noise of the dragon’s tail moving over the dead leaves.” In two works by Mitch Albom: *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003) (“Five People”) and *For One More Day* (2006) (“One More Day”) the author employs a pattern not unlike a news reporter’s mnemonic: who, what, when, where and why, but put into sensory experiences. In the analysis that follows I refer to Eric Berne, famous for advancing the notion that communication is a function of one’s circumstances, place and time. These ideas served as the foundation for his two most popular works, *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* and in *Games People Play*.

Albom’s stories have a parallel thread in that the protagonists in each examine their lives following death in one case and a brush with death in the other. The stories are modern parables in an old framework of “magical realism” that allow the reader to peer into state of things that escaped one in life, partly because one may be too narrow or self centered. Albom takes us on an incredible afterlife journey in examining the lives of his protagonists not only in the usual way in which one analyzes a life through living witnesses, but through confronting people who predeceased them. In each book the author uses a series of loosely connected vignettes about being caught in a paradigm of love of a father and also being unable to forgive the father for his abandonment. Although, a large part of their lives were determined by their father’s actions or lack thereof, the protagonists come to realize their lives were also affected for the better by individuals who they never acknowledged.

Berne’s thesis is that people are motivated to perform certain activities and that the outward manifestation of these activities appear as patterns or programs. If an author does not effectively deal with these patterns then the reader is likely not to find what is portrayed as real or truthful. Albom seems to understand this in the manner in which he chooses the input that the reader’s senses receive, input consistent with a collective notion of a common situation.

In *Five People* Eddie is an eighty year old man who heads up the maintenance department in an amusement park. As a boy man he worked for his father. Following WW II he got a job as a taxi driver and married his teenage sweetheart. In his early thirties his father dies and Eddie decides to assume his father’s position at the amusement park and remains there until his death in his early eighties. Albom essentially writes five

independent stories, each related to Eddie and his journey through life. As such we see in these vignettes the recurrence of the formula for describing the scene, the particular character we meet through physical description, and then their behavior, whether eye contact, limb movement, or other body parts, such as the head, neck or torso.

In Eddie's last living moments he is involved in a ride that comes crashing down and in a heroic act he is killed as he pushes a toddler out of the way. As the title suggests, in death he now meets five people, most of whom he only knew tangentially. Unknown to Eddie these people were in some way responsible for the life he lived.

Albom artistically sets each scene inserting his characters in the scene through constant attention to their physical description and subtle behaviors. In *Five People* he begins with an oft used formula found throughout the book: scene, character description, behavior, and finally the associated senses of smell, sounds, taste, touch and sight, not necessarily in that order.

Page 1, Albom writes the scene:

“...The park had the usual attractions, a boardwalk, a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, bumper cars, a taffy stand, and an arcade where you could shoot streams of water into a clown's mouth...”

Page 2, he writes the character description:

“...Eddie was a squat, white haired old man, with a short neck, a barrel chest, thick forearms, and a faded army tattoo on his right shoulder. His legs were thin and veined now, and his left knee. Wounded in the war, was ruined by arthritis. ...His face was broad and craggy from the sun, with salty whiskers and a lower jaw that protruded slightly, making him look prouder than he felt....He wore rubber soled shoes. He wore an old linen cap. His pale brown uniform suggested a workingman...”

Page 2, he writes the associated sounds:

“...He kept a cigarette behind his left ear and a ring of keys hooked to his belt.”

According to Berne, we learn to listen and report in particular ways, which eventually becomes our routine. We can turn this around when we are looking to validate a routine. Does what we are reading comport with what we know as a possible habit individuals might follow? If we fail to recognize these in then the author has failed. These routines reveal information about our attitudes and about automatically responding to other patterns with which we come in contact. According to Berne the individual

structures time in order of complexity along the lines of rituals, pastimes, games, intimacy and activity. A writer it seems should not ignore this construction.

For the less important characters he does not describe them with the same specificity, but nonetheless seems to follow the same design. In what follows the author adds the element of routine (I have underlined for emphasis on routine).

Page 4,

“One of shop workers, a lanky, bony-cheeked young man named Dominguez, was by the solvent sink, wiping grease off a wheel.”

Here we easily imagine the routine of working in the shop. Albom couples this with the banter that may take place and turns to a perfunctory greeting:

“Yo, Eddie”, he said.

“Dom,” Eddie said.

He writes about the associated odors:

“...The shop smelled like sawdust.”

He then writes about the scene:

“...It was dark and cramped with a low ceiling and pegboard walls that held drills and saws and hammers. Skeleton parts of fun park rides were everywhere: compressors, engines, belts, lightbulbs (SIC), the top of a pirate’s head. Stacked against one wall were coffee cans of nails and screws, and stacked against another wall were endless tubs of grease.”

Here the author exposes us to the manner in which things in a shop are stored.

In another example from Five People, Albom captures the scene in the description of the character that Eddie meets and not the place, itself:

“...Her face was gaunt, with sagging cheeks, rose-colored lipstick, and tightly pulled-back white hair, thin enough in parts to reveal the pink scalp beneath it. She wore wire-rimmed spectacles over her narrow blue eyes (pg. 111).”

She sat down then, although there was nothing to sit on. She simply rested on the air and crossed her legs, ladylike, keeping her spine straight. The long skirt folded neatly around her. A breeze blew, and Eddie caught the faint scent of perfume (pg. 113).

In addition to adequately describing characters and places in terms, an author needs to capture the behavior of characters. Here we might look to the modes in which communication occurs between individuals. For example, a communication or activity during a ritual is distinguished from a familiar activity in that the former is laden with a recurring or regulated set of actions on the part of the actor. For instance, a ritual might be what we do when we attend a religious ceremony. But, there are less obvious rituals, such as what we might do during a typical day at the office. In respect to interpersonal communications a ritual is a series of transactions that are complementary (reciprocal) and stereotyped. If a person acts differently during the “ritual period” where his communication style may change such as to choose a different vocabulary it may suggest a change in the relationship. The individual changing the usual transaction may be disclosing stress. The writer needs to find the means by which we come to understand how these emotions manifest.

An example in Albom’s work that calls attention to this point occurs in an altercation with his father. Clearly, Eddie had been in a ritualistic behavior pattern with his father for his entire life. He deferred to him and he dealt with conflict in a fairly standard way that is with respect and submission. The scene is made believable to the reader because Eddie moves away from ritual. We are led into an experience of dealing with the frustration of a parent who believes his child needs tough love, the adult child dealing with a parent’s inebriation, and the reaction of the child when he finally refuses to be bullied by the parent. This scene plays out when the protagonist returns from war and he has a row with his father that leads to his father taking a swing at him, and the son defending himself by holding his father’s arm.

Eddie was wounded during the war and when he returned he lived with his parents. He fell into a depression. His father seems to have resented his son’s inability to “snap out” of his depression. We are brought into a scene where his father comes home drunk one night and confronts his son (I have underlined the passages that emphasize where he evokes or senses):

“ ‘Get up,” he yelled now, his words slurring, “and get a job.”

Eddie stirred. His father yelled again.

“Get up...and get a job!”

The old man was wobbling, but he came toward Eddie and pushed him. “Get up and get a job! Get up and get a job!

Get up...and...GET A JOB!”

Eddie rose to his elbows.

“Get up and get a job! Get up and—”

“ENOUGH!” Eddie yelled, surging to his feet, ignoring the burst of pain in his knee. He glared at his father just inches away. He could smell the bad breath of alcohol and cigarettes.

The old man glanced at Eddie’s leg. His voice lowered to a growl. “See? You...ain’t...so...hurt?”

He reeled back to throw a punch, but Eddie moved on instinct and grabbed is father’s arm mid-swing. The old man’s eyes widened. This was the first time Eddie had ever done anything besides receive a beating as if he deserved it. His father looked at his own clenched fist, short of its mark, and his nostrils flared and this teeth gritted and he staggered backward and yanked his arm free. He stared at Eddie with the eyes of a man watching a train pull away.”

The change in the ritual between the son and the father has been complete. The episode resulted in Eddie’s father never speaking to his son again.

In *One More Day* the protagonist, Charley “Chick” Benetto, is the product of a broken home. However, until he is about eight years old, the home seems perfectly normal, where his father is a strong figure, one who sets the families agenda from where they vacation to what they eat, takes a strong interest in Chick. In fact his father’s main interest is turning the boy into a baseball player. Then one day his father disappears, completely abandons his family. In one cruel period he does not establish contact with Chick from the time he is eight until he plays college baseball. When Chick makes the college team and demonstrates potential of becoming a pro, his father returns to his life. Chick is a man frozen in the boyhood experience of losing his father, the man he worshipped. When the story begins Chick is a fifty year old man, divorced from his wife, out of work, and an alcoholic. His loser attitude has alienated him to the point where his daughter shuns him. He learns that his daughter gets married and does not invite him to the wedding. This pushes Chick to an act of suicide by going the wrong way on the on-ramp of a highway. He crashes and we find him in another world where he meets his dead mother. The remainder of the book is virtually spent in the company of his mother, where he learns about what caused his father to abandon the family, what sacrifices his mother made while he brew up and went to college and has an opportunity to apologize to his mother for his insensitivity over the years.

Returning to Berne, he suggests that we act programmatically as both individuals and as members of a social environment. Programming in a sense achieves efficiency in our day to day lives. In one form of programming Berne labeled material programming, *we structure our world in terms of objects and sequence*. An example of this is the way we work, play, collect and arrange things and even tell stories. In many ways the pattern defines what we believe, what we need and what our opinions are likely to be. Good writing such as demonstrated in Albom’s novels follow this prescription and therefore are believable. In this case despite the fact that we are in brought into the afterlife, a place

where we have no experience. An example of this is Albon's description of the *objects and sequence* in the scene following his near fatal crash.

After crashing his car Chick says: "I slowly, painfully got to my feet." He goes on to evoke images, sounds and to create the scene:

"My back was soaked. I ached all over. It was still raining lightly, but it was quiet, save for the sound of crickets. Normally, at this point, You'd say "I was happy to be alive," but I can't say that, I could make out the truck, like a big, hulking shipwreck, the front cab bent as if its neck had been snapped. Steam rose from the hood. One headlamp was still working, casting a lonely beam down the muddy hill that made twinkling diamond out of the shattered glass."

Chick carries the guilt of not defending his mother throughout his life, not in the regards to physical assaults, but simply not attending to her needs or perhaps recognizing the sacrifices she made, such as working a second job to get him through college. In fact, he was self centered like his father. In his mid forties Chick attends a birthday party for his mother. His father whom he had not heard from in years, calls tell him that the Pirates were having an Old Timer's game and the catcher could not attend, so he had arranged it so that Chick could fill in since he played for the Pirates during a world series as a back up pitcher. His father believed that if he attended the event that he might get something started with another baseball insider and end up getting a job as an assistant coach or some other position in pro ball. Chick was at first not interested, but finally agreed because he could never assert himself against his father. He would have to leave the party immediately and drive all night to get to the stadium for the next day's afternoon game. He proceeded to lie to his mother and his wife about having gotten a call from a customer. And, in what follows, we learn that while he was busy with his ball game, his mother died.

"In our dug out, there were big-bellied men who had clearly surrendered to the aging process, and who cracked jokes like, "Jesus, somebody get me some oxygen!" And then there were guys who still held to the code of taking all games seriously. I sat next to an old Puerto Rican outfielder, he had to be at least sixty, who kept spitting tobacco juice on the floor and mumbling, " Here we go,, babies, here we go..."

"...So when I stood at the plate in that Old Timers game, staring at a pitcher whose hair was gray, and when he threw what used to be his fastball but what now was just a pitch that floated in toward my chest, and when I swung and

made contact and heard the familiar *thwok* and I dropped my bat and began to run, convinced that I had done something fabulous, forgetting my old gauges, forgetting that my arms and legs lacked the power they once had, forgetting that as you age the walls get farther away, and when I looked up and saw what I had first thought to be a solid hit, maybe a home run, now coming down just beyond the infield toward the waiting glove of the second base man, no more than a pop-up, a wet firecracker, a dud, and a voice in my head yelled, “Drop it! Drop it!” as the second baseman squeezes his glove around my final offering to this maddening game--just as all that was happening, my mother, as she once noted, had something else happening back in Pepperville Beach.’

Her clock radio was playing big band music. Her pillows had been freshly plumped. And her body was crumpled like a broken doll on the floor of the bedroom, where she had come looking for her new red glasses and collapsed.

A massive heart attack.

She was taking her last breaths. ”

Skillfully, Albom creates a parallel between his Old Timer’s performance and his mother’s death and eventually brings us to the same place—the death of any residue of his imaginary life as a pro baseball player and the very real death of his mother.

Albom’s stories are relational where the protagonist is conflicted by a poor relationship with his father during his youth, one which pervades his life. His artful use of physical features imparts the quality of authenticity in emotions, it fills in the structure of the world he creates for the reader, and adds an energy between and among the people, things, time and events. Parenthetically, having been a trial lawyer I see a similarity to setting up the trial and the novelist telling a story. Each must reconstruct reality through the device of creating a scene in the framework of behaviors and time. This is achieved in both instances through bring forth facts in sensory experience, recreating either through testimony as the trial lawyer does or authorship as the writer does, the emotions and the epistemic clues evoked through sounds, smells, tactile, visual, and our tastes. Albom succeeds in all respects.