The Five People You Meet in Heaven

By Mitch Albom
Summary

Before his death, Eddie had been head of maintenance at the amusement park built on Ruby Pier. His job had been to ensure the safety of the rides. At 83 years of age, his body was worn out, his spirit likewise. That birthday a freak accident took his life and his journey toward understanding began.

“Eddie Maintenance”, as Eddie was known, had become convinced that his life on earth had served no useful purpose. He believed he had let opportunities to do better slip by him. The relationship with his abusive father had never been resolved. His father had died. It was too late. The love of his life, his wife Marguerite, had died young, leaving him lonely and depressed. There was also pain from a wartime injury. Marguerite and he had never had children. Their attempt at adoption had been tragically curtailed. His closest friend, Dominguez, was just a workplace acquaintance.

In heaven, Eddie was transported from one of five people to the next. Each of them had been associated with events in his life. He had no control over any aspect of this journey. Even his ability to speak was gone at the start. Each of these five helped him resolve one or two of his questions or concerns. Each had insight to impart.

Blue Man, Eddie’s first person, avoided hitting Eddie with his car thus making it possible for him to grow to adulthood. The Captain, his second person, shot Eddie in the calf to keep him from running into a burning building and so kept him alive to go on with his life. Ruby, his third person, helped Eddie see that his dad wasn’t all bad. She recounted heroic action taken by his dad to save the life of a friend who he thought had betrayed him. She guided Eddie to the point at which he could speak forgiveness. With the appearance of his fourth person, his wife Marguerite, Eddie felt ecstatic. They lingered together, Marguerite giving Eddie a little more insight into what heaven was about. Tala was Eddie’s fifth and last person. This meeting was particularly difficult for Eddie. Their common link was that, unbeknownst to him, during the war he had burned her alive. She had been a child at the time of her death and she appeared to him in heaven as a child. She told him how their lives overlapped. Then she asked him to do work that would help. She
asked him to help her heal by scrubbing off her scarred, burned flesh with a stone. He did so, revealing new, healthy skin below. Then she finished what the Captain had started, explaining how valuable Eddie had been to others during his lifetime. By maintaining the rides at the amusement park, Eddie had kept many children safe. Then she did what no other person in heaven had done. She articulated the words that identified him, that defined him by his work during his lifetime, “Eddie Maintenance”.

Eddie had reached the point at which he comprehended the importance of his life. He had made peace with his father and with the Captain. He had helped an innocent victim to heal. At last he was ready to enjoy heaven. Marguerite reappeared. In the background, throngs of people from the past, present and future were enjoying themselves together, all because of Eddie’s work as head of maintenance at the amusement park.

**Important People**

**Mitch** Albom, the author of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, is a sports writer for *The Detroit News* and author of several other works of fiction. He is a prolific fundraiser with respect to Detroit revitalization.

**Eddie**, the protagonist, is known as Eddie Maintenance at Ruby Pier Amusement Park.

**The Blue Man** is the first person Eddie meets after his death. Blue Man lets Eddie know that he is in heaven. Other people will appear to him there. Each will have information and insights to provide.

**The Captain** is Eddie’s second person in heaven. He had been his commanding officer during wartime deployment. He had shot Eddie in the leg to prevent him from running into a burning building. Later in the Captain took a risk and lost his life protecting the soldiers in his unit.

**Ruby** is Eddie’s third person. Her knowledge of an incident in his father’s life enabled Eddie to speak forgiveness over the memory of his father.
**Marguerite**, Eddie’s wife and love of his life is his fourth person. Her presence is a happy intermission for Eddie after the intensity of coming to forgiveness toward his father and a particularly difficult encounter still to come. Finally, after Eddie has completed the necessary encounters and conversations and has come to sufficient understanding, he and Marguerite enjoy a permanent reunion.

**Tala**, Eddie’s fifth person, had been accidentally burned to death by Eddie during the war when he participated in a vengeful action. In heaven, she asks him to help heal her burns.

**Key Insights**

1. Death may come unexpectedly, when it’s our time to go.
2. All endings are also beginnings.
3. It’s impossible to understand all the permutations and traumas of life while we’re here on earth.
4. Listening is essential to learning.
5. Skills developed as a youth, playing sports and games, can come in handy in later life situations.
6. Even though doing our duty, as we understand it, can result in unfortunate untended consequences, that should not necessarily deter us.
7. Parents can inflict lifelong damage on their children.
8. Marry and cherish the one you love.
9. Don’t wait to say, “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you”. Later may be too late.
10. The story of a person’s life can be told, in part, by memorabilia (s)he has collected.
11. A dream of youth may never be realized and that may be for the best.
12. The value of a person is determined by acts, not by status.

**Author’s Style**

Albom works as sports writer for the Detroit Free Press. He’s good enough at it to have received the Red Smith award. His style is journalistic, short statements.
punctuated by action, evocative sounds and snapshot-like imagery. It’s descriptive rather than expository. The story of Eddie, a neophyte in heaven, is told from the omniscient point of view. In heaven, Eddie is propelled from scene to scene, person to person, as if he were on an amusement park ride, being propelled through memories from decades earlier.

Recounting details of significant birthdays, from his birth up to his last birthday, is the author’s device for handling the transition from one significant event in Eddie’s life to the next. Descriptions of birthdays also supply information to the reader about Eddie. They develop his persona.

Suspense is maintained up to the end of the book. It’s accomplished by having Eddie ask over and over whether in his last moment on earth he had managed to save a little girl who was also in the path of the falling cart that killed Eddie.

Albom handles technical detail with ease such as hydraulic braking action. He convincingly describes how a substantial cable could succumb to wear and tear caused by contact with a small, sharp object.

Author’s Perspective

Albom portrays his protagonist gently, lovingly. He credits a “beloved” uncle of his with the main idea for this book. This uncle’s Thanksgiving dinner discourse had been about seeing the souls of departed loved ones late at night sitting on the edge of his hospital bed, waiting for him to join them. He dedicated the book to this uncle.

This is the story of a man who, returned from overseas wartime deployment, settles down where he grew up and works with his hands for the remainder of his life. His work is to maintain the mechanical functioning of rides in an amusement park. Symbolic of a working man, his fingernails stay dirty from performing the chores that keep visitors to the amusement park safe. His teenage dream of a future in which he would hold a position of importance is thwarted by the circumstances of his life. Almost by default, he slips into the same job that had been his father’s.
In this short novel Albom presents Eddie as the kind of person who, in an emergency, can instantly formulate and articulate a series of critical actions that must be done to save lives. Eddie is a smart man. He demonstrates his wits in handling a crisis both in a wartime setting where he conjures up a scheme to escape captors and, much later, in his response to an emergency at the amusement park where he works.

**Intended Audience**

This book contains several descriptions of physical abuse inflicted on Eddie and his brother by their father. Wartime violence is depicted in detail. Therefore, the intended audience would be adult or late teen.