For the dead, and the living, we must bear witness.

—Elie Wiesel

These simple yet evocative words, spoken by Elie Wiesel in January 1993 at the dedication ceremony for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, summarize my mission as a Holocaust educator. As part of a nine-week unit on tolerance and prejudice, my middle school students are immersed in Holocaust literature. The theme of bearing witness, of never forgetting, which runs through the literature, is the central driving force of our work in the classroom. This theme is encapsulated and personified for my students through Wiesel’s autobiographical work, *Night*.

Wiesel’s journey into the heart of darkness began in the spring of 1944, when, as a boy of fifteen, he was deported to the Auschwitz Nazi death camp. Following his liberation from Buchenwald in April 1945, he vowed not to speak of his experiences for ten years. But by his silence, he came to believe that he was condemning Holocaust victims to a second death. He affirmed that a confrontation with reality, no matter how painful, must be initiated in order to prevent these events from ever happening again; therefore, *La Nuit (Night)*, was written to serve as a reminder of this monstrous period in human history.

**Why Do I Teach This?**

The Columbus (Ohio) Public School District is a large (65,000+ students) urban school system comprised of 112 elementary, 26 middle, and 16 high schools. The middle school where I teach is located in the northern part of the city. Of our 830 students, 46 percent are African American, 5 percent are Asian American, 4 percent are Latino, and the remaining 45 percent are Caucasian. While the majority of our students come from middle-class families, 28 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch programs, and my classroom reflects this diversity. I teach the tolerance and prejudice unit as part of my eighth grade reading/language arts curriculum. Throughout the year, my students have read and responded to literature that requires them to confront ethical issues. Our Holocaust unit is no exception.

Like many urban schools, ours is not exempt from racism and prejudice. Ethnic slurs are used by students of all races, and although limited in scope, signs of gang activity—“colors,” graffiti, and hand gestures—are evident. My own family emigrated from Cuba when I was four; I grew up in a Roman Catholic household where, as a result of my cultural upbringing, racism and bigotry were things only seen on the evening news. Coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, and having spent nearly twenty years in the business world before making a career change to education, I believed that there was a real need for anti-
racist pedagogy in the curriculum. With this aim in mind, I developed a nine-week unit to teach tolerance and the valuing of diversity, using the history and literature of the Holocaust as the medium.

A sign hangs in my classroom, centered above the front chalkboard. I don’t remember where or when I first read this particular quotation, but it has served as the focal point of my teaching for the past five years. My students, being the questioning, all-noticing, but somewhat shy beings that eighth graders are, usually wait to ask me about it until the second or third week of school. For thirty-six weeks every year I urge my students to read this sign on a daily basis. Even though the words are short and sweet, it is the message that I want them to make part of their personal credo. By the time we reach the beginning of the second semester and the start of our unit on the Holocaust, they have pretty much committed the words to memory; over the next nine weeks, the message will become clearer.

The sign itself is simple enough: an 11" x 17" sheet of white paper, mounted on a red background and wisely laminated years ago. Printed on the face of the sign are these words:

When a child is born, it has no prejudices.
Bias is learned, and someone
Has to model the behavior.

I begin the unit by telling my students a story. Many of their parents weren’t even born when Kitty Genovese was murdered in New York City. It was unseasonably warm that March night in 1964; many of Kitty’s neighbors had their windows open, trying to get some relief from the heat. Yet none of Kitty’s thirty-eight neighbors did anything to help her; many even closed their windows to shut out the sounds of her screams as she was stabbed, beaten, and left to die on the steps of her apartment building. The discussion that follows serves as an introduction and lead-in to a study of apathy; Maurice Ogdan’s “Hangman” and Eve Bunting’s Terrible Things serve to illustrate the consequences of apathy, of becoming a bystander.

Over the next two weeks, my students learn the history of the period that led up to the “Final Solution.” From the roots of modern anti-Semitism to the rise of Hitler, they see how the democratic values we hold so dear can be quickly and ruthlessly taken away. A study contrasting the Nuremberg Laws to the Bill of Rights drives home the message that personal liberties are fragile, indeed, and that as United States citizens it is their duty to safeguard these rights for future generations. Armed with a basic knowledge of the history, students are now ready to engage the literature of the Holocaust.

Adolescents respond to Holocaust literature in much the same way as adults. As Culbertson notes, they are susceptible to the power of the narrative and readily make connections with the young victim/survivor/author. Danks points out that first-person narratives reveal unique insights that are not always apparent or easily comprehended by students when they read historical documents or textbook accounts of these events. The story of the Holocaust, when told through literary accounts—be they diaries, memoirs, or poetry—offers young readers a way to construct a kind of common sense about the historical events by connecting with a participant/author who was, at the time, their chronological peer. As a class, they read two such narratives, one of which is Wiesel’s Night. In addition, I require each student to read a minimum of three additional first-person narratives from a preselected list of nearly ninety titles and write reflective journals based on their independent reading.

I have been guiding my students’ reading of Night for four years. As educators, we are always striving to find new ways to personalize our classroom instruction. My greatest opportunity to do this came during the summer of 1998, when I came face-to-face with the evil that is Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Personalizing the Literature

Fifty-four years after Elie Wiesel was driven from a cattle car onto the selection ramp at Birkenau, my own journey as a Holocaust educator led me to the very gates of hell. I was fortunate enough to be one of forty-seven middle and high school teachers selected to participate in a three-and-a-half-week summer seminar on the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance in Poland and Israel, sponsored by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. In preparation for the trip, I had devoured Martin Gilbert’s Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past. It was the second day of our trip—a raw, blustery, unusually chilly July day, even for eastern Poland. We had driven in a light rain through the Polish countryside, the heavy forests reaching out to the very edge of the new, modern highway connecting Warsaw and Krakow. The village of Oswiecim is picturesque; modern houses mingled with older-style
architecture, swing sets and cluttered yards gave evidence of families with happy children. The idyllic setting changed abruptly as our bus rounded a curve in the roadway, crossed an abandoned railway spur, and brought us to the gates of Birkenau.

I had seen the picture thousands of times—the single rail line that led through the huge red brick gateway. All of my adult life I had wanted to come here; to see this place for myself and bear witness; to pray at the site of the four scientifically designed and constructed crematoria for the millions who died here. Yet when the moment finally arrived, I stood in the parking lot, rooted to the ground. I had often heard and read the expression “my blood froze.” Until that moment, I had thought this phrase to be figurative language. I had never experienced such a feeling until that cold, rainy afternoon. The aura of evil that hangs over this place, these hundreds of acres, is tangible. It’s real. I have felt it. Even with all of my “prior knowledge,” I was not prepared for what greeted my eyes as we passed through the gates. In the haze left by the mid-morning rain, the rail line that splits the camp and leads to the crematoria seemed to go on forever. As I walked along the gravel path, the very same path where millions walked to their deaths, Wiesel’s words, “For the dead, and the living, we must bear witness” kept echoing in my heart, in my conscience, in my very soul. We had spent several hours earlier in the day at the “mother camp” of Auschwitz I. We had seen the torture blocks, the “Wall of Death,” the mounds of shoes and human hair. We had walked through the gas chamber and crematorium, yet nothing had prepared us for the stark reality, the huge, barren emptiness that is Birkenau today. Of the hundreds of wooden barracks on our right, only a few remain standing; the majority are skeletons, marked only by the stone chimneys. We looked to our left, to the women’s camps; there, barracks built of brick stand in mute testimony to the thousands who once occupied them. The setting itself was made even more unsettling by the lush grass that grows everywhere. It was midsummer in eastern Poland; wildflowers grew along the barbed wire fence, where electricity no longer flowed. I had often heard survivors tell of the all-engulfing mud that covered the entire camp, seemingly year-round, mud so deep and thick that shoes were literally sucked off of feet. And there was mud that day—in the silence that surrounded us, the crunch of the gravel path under our feet reverberated in the stillness as we were drawn ever onward. Unlike the millions who trod this path before me, I knew what awaited at the end of this walk; yet, like them, I too had to go on, to see the journey through to the end.

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We paused for a moment at the crossing, where the unloading ramp intersects the main “road” that divides the camp. It was here that Josef Mengele, the “Angel of Death,” decided by the mere flick of his thumb who would live and who would die. I wanted to linger here, to try to become one with the millions, but our guide from the State Museum hurried us on. “Keep moving, please,” seemed to be the order of the day, but “Raus! Schnell, schnell!” were the words that rang in my mind’s ear. Suddenly, the tracks disappeared and our path ended. To our right was the International Monument to the Victims, where dignitaries place ceremonial wreaths when they visit this place. But the pile of rubble to our left drew us like a magnet. Even in total ruin, Krematorium II is huge—the underground undressing room clearly visible, the steps still intact. So is the gas chamber itself, once capable of holding more than 2,000 human beings. Above ground, shattered brick, concrete, and twisted steel are all that remain of the crematorium, with its rails, embedded in the concrete floor, that guided the carts to the fifteen Topf & Sone-built ovens. I felt the tears form in my eyes, my chest constrict, and the uneasiness build in the pit of my stomach. As we walked around the ruins, we came to what at first glance appeared to be a small, ordinary pond. But the pile of rubble to our left drew us like a magnet. Even in total ruin, Krematorium II is huge—the underground undressing room clearly visible, the steps still intact. So is the gas chamber itself, once capable of holding more than 2,000 human beings. Above ground, shattered brick, concrete, and twisted steel are all that remain of the crematorium, with its rails, embedded in the concrete floor, that guided the carts to the fifteen Topf & Sone-built ovens. I felt the tears form in my eyes, my chest constrict, and the uneasiness build in the pit of my stomach. As we walked around the ruins, we came to what at first glance appeared to be a small, ordinary pond. Closer examination, however, revealed that something was amiss, for the soil of the sides and perimeter of the pond was not brown, like the rest of the surrounding area—it was gray. This was an ash pit, where the
remains of untold thousands were dumped after the burning process was completed. Again, I felt tears start to form; although I am Catholic, the words of the Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead, formed in my mind as I prayed silently for the repose of the souls of the men, women, and children who lie mingled here in the soil of Poland.

It was late afternoon when we boarded the bus for the short trip to Krakow. As I sat in silence, staring out the window at the verdant farmland of Poland, I knew that my students would have a very different interaction with Night from this day forward. I have been there—I have seen it with my own eyes, felt it with my hands and my spirit, smelled the scent of death that still lingers over this place—I have been to this hell on earth we call Birkenau. I thought I knew it before I came here, but the words “to bear witness” have now taken on a new, much more personal meaning.

Prereading Night

Throughout the first half of the school year, my students are immersed in contemporary realistic and historical fiction; the works they read, by such authors as Walter Dean Myers, Gary Paulsen, S. E. Hinton, and others, challenge them to think critically about making ethical decisions. Suddenly, a highly charged work of nonfiction is sitting on their desks, awaiting their response. Before they can formulate personal responses, however, there are specific schema that must be constructed, for to understand Elie Wiesel, it is necessary to have some grounding in Judaism. My students spend two periods (eighty-four minutes) with a local rabbi in order to gain a perspective on Jewish religion and culture that I, as an outsider, cannot provide. Thus armed with basic knowledge, they are now better prepared to understand the Judaic references that are found in all of Wiesel’s writings.

By now, five weeks into the unit, my students have enough information on the Holocaust, and on Wiesel himself, to successfully engage the text from a cultural, social, and cognitive standpoint. Given the voice of the narrator, the subject matter, and the way in which Wiesel delivers his message, the impact of Night must be felt and understood with the heart, the conscience, and the soul of the individual reader. It was this response, on first reading, that most interested me.

I had decided to pursue several key areas for class discussion and reflective writing: loss of faith, binary oppositions, figurative language and symbolism, the issue of “truth,” and the role of the narrator.

Reader Responses

Throughout the previous semester, my students had been keeping response journals on their independent readings, as well as writing reflective responses to our in-class readings. My purpose in giving these assignments was to get them to evaluate true-life situations and to explore their own sense of personal ethics. One of the first major assignments my students were charged with as we began our reading of Night was to write a reflective response to the following passage, which they had just heard read on audiotape by Wiesel himself:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

“...Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust...” (32)

“They are such little words, but they have so much meaning and feeling that it was like they summed up the entire book,” Lindsay responded.

All of my students, in one way or another, commented on the line, “Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.” For several of them who are deeply religious, these words were very hard to comprehend, especially knowing how deeply religious the teen-aged Wiesel had been before his deportation to Auschwitz. Marcia responded, “If I were there, I would definitely think that God had abandoned me... Is there hope? Will there still be life? So many questions. Why did God have to punish me like this?” One of my more reluctant readers had no problem completing the assignment. “If there is no God,” he wrote, “there is no me.” Another student, a devout Jehovah’s Witness, stated, “To feel like your God and your soul have been murdered must mean that you’ve lost your faith. I could not live without my faith in God.”
Later in his memoir Wiesel recounts the hanging of a young boy (60–62) and gives further evidence of his feeling of abandonment and loss of faith. Phrases such as “. . . I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and without man. . . .” (65) spurred animated discussions. Several of my students argued about whether Wiesel, if he truly was as religious as he said, could lose his faith so completely in a matter of a few short months. Others responded that living day after day in the hell (their word) of Auschwitz, living in a world where death was everywhere and people were dehumanized to the level of beasts of burden, would destroy anyone’s faith, not only in God, but in themselves.

These questions were a natural lead-in for a discussion on the role of binary oppositions and the use of figurative language in Night. Wiesel paints for us a world literally turned upside-down—where evil is the ruling force, where humanity, love, and compassion are destroyed, and where darkness prevails. The very title, Night, conveys images of dread and danger. Yet, in contrast, he describes the day when he was transferred from Birkenau, the killing center, to the main camp: “. . . It was a beautiful April day. The fragrance of spring was in the air” (37).

My students were quick to notice the reversal of roles that occurred, whereby Wiesel became the caregiver/protector as his father grew weaker.

The images of spring, of new life and a world renewing itself, are in sharp contrast to the horrors of the night he had described just five pages earlier. “Night was when he arrived at Auschwitz, when his mother and sister were gassed, when they set out on the death march, and his father died during the night at Buchenwald,” Sara commented. “Almost everything evil that happened to him happened at night, which is why he chose ‘night’ as the title.”

When asked why Wiesel makes such extensive use of simile and metaphor, Devon replied, “There are no words to describe what was happening. How do you describe the indescribable?”

My students also discussed Auschwitz as a symbol of a world where evil reigned supreme, where cruelty and brutality replaced love and compassion. They saw Auschwitz, the entire Holocaust experience, as a world perverted by evil, where the unnatural and inhumane became the ordinary, and where goodness and mercy, when they could be found, became the exceptions to the rule. Yet what seemed to strike them most was the fact that, through it all, Wiesel and his father never lost that most human of all emotions. If anything, the bond of love between them grew stronger as a result of their experience. My students were quick to notice the reversal of roles that occurred, whereby Wiesel became the caregiver/protector as his father grew weaker. As Wiesel says, “What would he do without me? I was his only support” (82). Even as he witnesses other sons abandon and in one instance even kill their fathers for a crust of bread, Wiesel becomes the father figure. Several of my students saw in this a sign that the young Wiesel, for all his statements to the contrary, had not really lost his faith. “How could he have given up all faith and hope and still fight so hard to keep his father alive for one more day?” one student asked. “He must have still had some faith left, or he would have given up and died himself.”

Throughout our earlier work, my students had been encouraged to question the reliability of the narrator: Why do narrators, especially in fiction, say what they say? What is the “hidden agenda”? Can the narrator be taken at face value, be believed? Once again, the eternal question of “What is truth?” reared its ugly head. This time, however, there was no questioning the reliability of the narrator. My students were unanimous in their agreement that Wiesel did indeed have a reason for writing Night. There can be no doubt that he wants to move the reader in a specific way. In true Aristotelian fashion, Wiesel suffers great pain. If he has a “fatal flaw,” it could be argued that his “flaw” was to be born at the wrong time and place, and the reader feels that pain acutely. In her journal, Ebony wrote, “I thank God every day that I never had to go through the pain and heartache that millions of human beings had to go through then.” Another student wrote, “I really feel his pain.”

Unlike discussions of fictional works, the question of the author’s credibility never arose. In
fiction, the voice of the first-person narrator is often limiting, especially in young adult literature, where the narrator is a youth. Their age and limited life experience leave these young narrators in a position where their authenticity and reliability can be challenged. Wiesel's work is autobiographical; the point of view of the narrator is not an opinion. However, even though Wiesel was but a teenager himself when the events described in Night took place, he was thirty years old when the first English language edition of Night was published. Are the conversations he recounts recorded exactly as they were spoken? Perhaps, perhaps not; it doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that the message, the author/narrator’s intention, rings clear—what happened at Auschwitz and hundreds of other camps, must never happen again.

My students were quick to point out that it has happened and continues to happen. One student, the child of Cambodian refugees, shared with the class stories her parents had told her about the genocide of Cambodia’s killing fields. Another brought in newspaper articles from the Columbus Dispatch covering the trials of soldiers accused of mass murder and crimes against humanity in Bosnia, and of the atrocities in Kosovo. Still another brought in a copy of Jeanne Wakatsuki Huston’s Farewell to Manzanar, comparing the frightening resemblance between the barracks at the Manzanar “detention center” and the slides I had shown them of Birkenau.

So why does Night affect us this way? The answer, according to my students, is because Wiesel tells his story in such simple yet eloquent language, with such passion, that there is no way the reader can doubt his sincerity. Yes, they agree, he does have an “agenda.” They also agree with the comment made by Bill Moyers that Elie Wiesel represents the voice of witness. In Night, Wiesel fulfills the dual role of both narrator and educator: “Silence has never been an answer, the survivors chose to teach; and what is their writing, their testimony, if not teaching? To tell the tale and to bear witness” (“Ten and Now” 267).

To bear witness is Wiesel’s agenda as author/narrator. Who better to tell the tale than one who lived through the horrors he describes, who suffered the loss of family, the loss of God, and nearly the loss of self? To my students, this is what makes Night so effective and Wiesel so believable; he was there, he lived to tell about it, and he does it in a way that makes the Holocaust experience real for the reader. “Reading Night was what brought it all together for me,” was Danny’s response. “It’s not that I didn’t believe it happened, but after Night, how can there be any doubt?”

Summary

Why do I do it? Because I, too, believe Elie Wiesel’s message. We must bear witness to what happened. Today, as the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, the day is not far off when there will be no first-person narrators, when even the eloquent voice of Elie Wiesel will be silenced. As an educator, I must teach the next generation to continue telling the tale.

After experiencing Night, my students write personal letters to Wiesel expressing their views, opinions, and feelings. I make copies of his response for each student, and the originals hang, framed and matted, on the wall in my classroom. Over the past five years, my students have consistently listed Night as the one book they read in my class that made the most impact on their lives; I don’t think next year’s class will be any different.

Why should today’s students be asked to read this memoir? Why subject them to the immense cruelty, brutality, and dehumanization that was the Holocaust? Do we really need to fill their minds with numbers such as six million dead, 1.5 million of whom were children under the age of fifteen? Why must we touch their emotions with haunting stories of men, women, and children who were shot, gassed, and burned to ashes? The answer is blunt, matter-of-fact, and really quite simple: today’s students need to learn about the human capacity for evil so they can guard against it. They need to understand that the seeds of prejudice and racism still lie just below our thin veneer of civilization, that racism and prejudice know neither color nor gender, and that acts of genocide are still being committed today, more than fifty years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Night provides our students with the opportunity to gain insight about and reinforce the human capacity for love, understanding, compassion, faith, and respect for life.

As stated earlier, we are always looking for ways to personalize lessons, to tie as much real-world experience as possible into the literature so that our students will “connect.” There was a noticeable difference this year in my students’ responsive writings. My previous years’ students had
seen videos and photographs of Auschwitz as we discussed Wiesel’s experiences. Now, as they look at the images of Auschwitz today, they often see their teacher in the picture, or hear his voice narrating the videotape that was obviously taken with a personal camcorder. Now, even though removed by half a century from the actual events, I speak from a position of personal knowledge and experience—I speak with the voice of witness.

Perhaps it was Ronnie who stated it best. One of my more skeptical students at the beginning, he was quick to ask, “Why do we have to spend nine weeks studying something that happened to a bunch of Jews in Europe more than fifty years ago? Why aren’t we studying about what happened to blacks in our country?” He now readily admits that racism truly is color blind, that issues of tolerance and diversity extend far beyond skin pigmentation, and that as long as there are people who are devalued because they are perceived as “different,” who are looked upon as being “unworthy” of sharing our living space, we still have a long, hard road ahead of us. If these ninety students who share thirty-six weeks of their lives with me each year are any indication, we just might be on the road to recovery.

Works Cited


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