Courage

Why Elie Wiesel Can Never Forget

By Curt Schleier

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, is sitting in his office on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The room is covered floor to ceiling with books. Magazines and sundry files are piled neatly on the floor, in every available nook and cranny. Eventually, you notice that he is dressed in a blue suit and tie; that he is just a few pounds above gaunt; and that when he speaks, it's in a whisper so soft it's as though the words are afraid to reveal themselves. But all this—the clothing, the surroundings, how quietly he speaks—you notice later.

First and foremost, you notice the eyes. They are large and dark—and very, very sad.

Wiesel knows he has a reputation for sadness but believes it's inaccurate. "I'm not at all sad," he proclaims. "My lectures are full of laughs. People laugh and laugh and laugh. I like humor." But despite protests to the contrary, sadness permeates Wiesel, surrounding him, like an oversized winter coat, from head to foot. It's as much a part of his being as his arms and legs, a fact his friends acknowledge—even if he doesn't.

Gary Rosenblatt remembers the first time he saw Wiesel, 25 years ago. Rosenblatt, currently editor and publisher of The Jewish Week in New York, was a fledgling journalist at the time, attending a symposium in Florida. He spied a man across the room who looked a lot like Wiesel.

"A lot?" Rosenblatt asks rhetorically. "He looked just like him. But then I thought it couldn't be him. That man is smiling."

Wiesel's friend John Silber, the chancellor of Boston University, where Wiesel is Andrew Mellon Professor in the Humanities, makes what at first seems an unlikely analogy. He compares Wiesel's eyes to the face of a longtime drinker. A drunk can't spend 15 or 20 years drinking, Silber says, and not have it visible on his or her face. In the same way, "you can't go through the horror and not have it show. I don't think you've lived the life he's lived and not have it show. The remarkable thing is that his eyes are sad—and not angry."

Born in 1928, Wiesel was just 15 years old when his parents, three sisters, and the other Jews in the small Transylvanian town of Sighet were rounded up and transported in cattle cars to Auschwitz. "Men to the left! Women to the right!" the arrivals were told. He never saw his mother or younger sister again. He and his father were put to work.

He has no idea how he survived. In the beginning, his sole goal was to save his father. "I knew if I died, he died." But when his father passed—just three months before their camp was liberated—he didn't care at all about continuing to live.

Wiesel, who has written more than 40 books, both novels and nonfiction, understands drama. "I could invent all kinds of nice stories to say [about having the desire to survive]—that I want..."
ed to live to testify, to bear witness. It was not true. Afterward. But not during.”

During, there was nothing—not even a plea to or a bargain with God. God, he feels, had nothing to do with his survival. “If God was good enough to perform miracles for me, he could have performed miracles for many others too, who were worthier than I, better than I, purer than I.

“It was an accident, a sheer accident.”

After almost a year at three concentration camps, Wiesel was liberated and transferred with others to an orphanage in France. There he began the recuperative process, a return to living. It was far easier than one might imagine. “The truth is,” Wiesel has written, “it was not that difficult—less difficult than adjusting to death.” He was reunited with his two older sisters, studied literature, philosophy, and psychology at the Sorbonne, and quite accidentally got involved in journalism. He wanted to emigrate to Palestine but, when that proved impossible, went to work for a newspaper published in France sponsored by a militant Zionist organization, the Irgun.

Journalism suited him. Subsequently,

Wiesel and Marion, his wife of 30 years

Receiving his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize. Son Elisha is at left

Wiesel (circled), then a teenager, and other prisoners slept packed in bunks like these during their incarceration in the Buchenwald concentration camp

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he went to work as the Paris correspondent for an Israeli newspaper and in 1956 moved to the United States to serve as the paper’s U.S. correspondent. He became a citizen and, in 1969, married another survivor, Marion Erster Rose, originally from Vienna. They had a son, Elisha.

And there matters might have ended, anonymously, with Wiesel among the thousands of survivors carving out an existence and desperately trying to put the past behind them. But it was not so.

Because he attributed his survival to a simple roll of the cosmic dice, he felt the need to give his life some purpose. “I said to myself, ‘Someone else could have taken my place. Since it’s I, I must do something with that. Teach, sensitize.’”

It had begun in 1958 with the publication of Night, first in France and then, gradually, around the world. It was a book so dark, so unsparingly honest, so, yes, sad, some refused—or didn’t want—to believe it could be true. In fact, almost three decades later, in reporting about his winning the Nobel Prize, Time magazine wrote, inaccurately, “His first novel, Night, was an indelible account of the Nazi atrocities as seen through the eyes of a teenage boy.” In fact, Night is not a novel, but Wiesel’s account of his own imprisonment in the camps.

Even today, Night is described as “technically a novel” by the Amazon.com Web site.

It is a book so grounded in reality that Wiesel waited a decade before starting to write it—out of fear. A student of the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism rooted in part in numerology, he knew that words can open the gates of heaven—or hell. “I know the dangers inherent in words. I wanted to be sure they would not affect other people in a way they shouldn’t.”

...
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People of the past and people of the present. That's why I'm involved in so many human-rights activities. There are so many prisoners. People are starving and suffering and despairing.

"I look and see the swollen bellies and haunted eyes of the very young in Ethiopia, in Cambodia, in South America. I could have been that child. I was that child. I must make the gesture."

He has traveled the world to fight injustice. Boston University's Silber recalls how in 1984 he asked Wiesel to get involved with the Kissinger Commission, then investigating atrocities committed against the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua. "He immediately flew... down to Honduras, took a little plane to get as close as he could. Then they got in a duguat canoe to get to the Miskito Indians, met with them, and flew back to issue his report. Without stopping, he got on a plane to Paris to speak to French government officials who were planning on selling helicopter gunships to the Sandinistas. He told them what was going on, and Mitterrand canceled the helicopters. That's a good example of the way he becomes involved."

More recently, Wiesel took a three-day tour of refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania. While he has said he sees little hope of long-term reconciliation in the Balkans, he believes the Kosovars must return home. "They will start building, rebuilding," he told reporters. "It's psychologically important."

Wiesel and his wife Marion sponsor a series of symposia around the world called "Anatomy of Hate." In 1995, for example, he brought together leaders of groups locked in conflict: Israelis and Palestinians; Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland; Serbs, Bosnians, Croats; whites and blacks from both Africa and the United States.

"He creates a neutral space where putative enemies can meet and begin to perceive and cherish their mutual humanity and lay the foundation for future friendships," Dr. Silber says.

Wiesel organizes these conferences because he feels "hate is destructive even as a concept. So I try to fight it. Anger I don't mind. Anger I have enough of. Anger is good; it can be a creative [force]. Good works of art can come out of anger. But nothing comes out of hate."

His monotone whisper rises only when he's asked if he's forgiven the Germans. "I don't forgive," he says sharply. "Who am I to forgive? No one authorized me to forgive!" But almost as quickly, that flash of emotion is gone.

"But I do think that the young people today deserve something better, something more, something other than my despair. What I am trying to say is do not pass judgment on an entire people. I do not believe in collective guilt. I have German students in my class who are so good, so pure, so committed, it's a pleasure looking at them, to see how they work. I can imagine the burden on them, being German," he observes.

There is nothing disingenuous about him when he says that. He is truly concerned about the burden on the children of his enemies. In fact, it isn't so much that he sees light where others see only darkness: He sees light out, won't stop until he finds it, and that sustains him. "I have to tell the whole story of the Holocaust," he says. "The whole story contains some sparks as well. There were people who didn't just stand by, who saved Jews during the war. There weren't many, but a few. There were good people everywhere, and I cling to the few. It's enough. It's a despairing need to find hope."

He's determined to pass on that hope in his writing. "After Night, in my books, if I do not find a way out of despair, I do not publish it," he says. "I keep the manuscript until I find a way out."

Last fall, Boston University, where he teaches philosophy and literature, held a celebration to commemorate Wiesel's 70th birthday as well as his life and work. The famous came to honor him, but perhaps most telling were the tributes from students and former students, who spoke about his inspiration and his modesty.

"The simplicity of your heart bound us together," wrote one student. "From you I have learned to bear witness to the truth, so that the truth will not be silent."

The Nobel committee echoed those sentiments when it awarded him the 1986 peace prize, calling him "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides in an age when violence, repression, and racism continue to characterize the world. Wiesel is a messenger to mankind: His message is one of peace, atonement, and human dignity."

The praise washes off quickly, before it has a chance to penetrate. "I am not a tzaddik," he insists, using the Hebrew word for "righteous person." "A tzaddik is a just man. I'm just a student, a very good student. I would refuse [the title of tzaddik]. There is a tzaddik in every one of us, you as well as I."

His modesty is genuine. "Especially since the Nobel Prize, three, four, five invitations come in every day, requests to speak here, to march there, to sign this and that petition. I'm invited all over the world. It's not me. They're inviting the Nobel laureate. I know this very well. "Nothing can be more gratifying than knowing that something you've done has moved people. But I prefer not to think about it. If you think about it, you take yourself too seriously."

How does he fight vanity? "That's very easy. I close my eyes and see myself from before. I see myself as a young student, or I see myself with my father. "That is truth."

Curt Schlieler is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

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As she pursued her writing, Dorothy was pierced with a "strong sense of evil, of the brokenness of this world," says Jane Sammon, a longtime Catholic Worker who traveled with Day in the United Kingdom in the early '70s. In November 1917, Day had gone to prison for the first time, after being arrested with some 40 other suffragists demonstrating in front of the White House. This harrowing experience confirmed the feeling she should help her fellow souls directly rather than as an observer. So in 1918, Dorothy began nurse's training at Brooklyn's King's County Hospital.

There she fell deeply and obsessively in love with an orderly named Lionel Moise. When he left her once, she was devastated (some have suggested she attempted suicide). He threatened to abandon her again if she became pregnant, and when she did, he convinced her to have an abortion—then left anyway. On the rebound, she briefly married Berkeley Tobey, a co-founder of the Literary Guild, and penned a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, The Eleventh Virgin.

After her divorce, the writer drifted; at one point, a friend commented, "She's too religious to be a communist." It was true. She was increasingly attracted to the Catholic Church—which, she liked to point out, was the church to which the masses of poor immigrants belonged. Eventually, she sold the film rights to her novel and bought a cottage on the rural eastern shore of Staten Island. There, she hoped to find peace.

The simple life was heaven for Dorothy. She wrote serial fiction and shared genuine love with her common-law husband, British biologist Forster Batterham, a confirmed atheist who revered nature but reviled mankind. Dorothy's own happiness, meanwhile, was leading her to pray almost constantly, say the