

AFTERWORD

More Than a Mentor: Elie Wiesel at Boston University

Martha Liptzin Hauptman
Boston University

Those having torches will pass them on to others.

(Plato para. 222)

Elie Wiesel is known throughout the world as an author, moral philosopher, and humanitarian activist. Through his efforts and his advocacy for victimized groups, this Nobel Peace Prize laureate has influenced many world leaders, if not the course of world history. Perhaps less famously, since 1976 he has been the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. As a teacher, he has touched the lives of thousands of students, who, profoundly changed, have gone into the world bearing his message of peace and hope.

I came to study with Professor Wiesel in September 1976 when he began teaching at Boston University. I had read *Night* (1960), *Dawn* (1961), and *The Accident* (1962), his first three books, and like so many of his readers, I had been deeply moved. Having studied religion and philosophy at Columbia University, I was interested in hearing what this philosophical writer could teach me. At that time I was considering continuing my graduate work. During the fall semester he taught a Holocaust course; it was to be the only class with this particular focus

that he would offer at Boston University. He said that it was “too difficult to teach this material.” He offered it when no one else was teaching such classes, but now he would leave it to others, often warning them that the subject matter might take its toll on them.

That course ended in December, and in January 1977 I left behind the pursuit of an advanced degree to begin working as his assistant. What I have to share is a very personal view of the man and the students who came in and out of his office and mine during my twenty-seven years of working for him. What I have seen has been a privilege, and it has been deeply rewarding to work alongside a man who has taught me many valuable lessons, most importantly, that one must keep going; no matter what, one must never give up on human beings. For he himself keeps going with grace and humility. There are times when I do not know how he can go on speaking out on behalf of humanity. The world lurches endlessly from one tragedy to another. But he does not stop shouting. Perhaps his model is that of the Just Man found in one of his finest stories, related in *One Generation After* (1970), and also used as a preamble to *The Testament* (1981):

One of the Just Men came to Sodom, determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening; he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise kept silent, as if there were no Just Man in their midst.

One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher, approached him with these words: “Poor stranger. You shout, you expend yourself body and soul; don’t you see that it is hopeless?”

“Yes, I see,” answered the Just Man.

“Then why do you go on?”

“I’ll tell you why. In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me.” (*One* 72)

For Wiesel the memory of his past suffering, the cauldron of the Auschwitz experience, will not let him rest. He flies from New York to the four corners of the world, to teach audiences that we are capable of rising above doing violence to one another, that we can do good. Invitations pour in from around the globe, particularly from troubled communities in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Eastern Europe, and from college campuses suffering from racism in all parts of the world. He has lived through one of the worst chapters in human history, yet still he believes in the possibility of goodness. So on whom else can these troubled souls call who will not only teach but also inspire? Who else will defuse an explosive situation? Who else will answer the call? Memory makes him respond.

When ceremonies marking fifty years since the liberation of Auschwitz were being planned in Poland for January 1995, and it looked as if the Jewish component would be left out or at least slighted, who else besides Wiesel could with gentle and polite but forceful urging change the course of the entire commemoration? Lech Walesa adjusted his speech; the Poles restructured their ceremonies. Wiesel single-handedly softened what could have been a very difficult and potentially ugly situation.

What can I write here that the informed reader does not already know? Perhaps it relates to my witnessing over all these years the stunning metamorphosis of young people who have been exposed to a master teacher, eminent humanitarian, and humane soul who deeply believes in them and their impact on the future, a man who encourages them to believe in themselves and each other, for in my time with him I observed his impact on the lives of many students, first and foremost as their mentor.

What is a mentor? A teacher. A role model. An inspiration. And Elie Wiesel? Isn't he all of these? Yes, but he is more. Why do I say that? And what do I mean by "more than a mentor"? He has changed the course of many young people's lives dramatically, not only by what he taught them in his classroom but also in personal encounters. I have seen them enter his office for the briefest of appointments, perhaps only ten minutes, and then emerge overcome by emotion. Some wear a

look of wonder, some come out in tears, some with smiles.

What goes on in those sessions? Students tell me that Wiesel fixes his gaze upon them, and the ensuing experience is profound. For a few moments the world seems to stop. Often, a meeting with him can be an epiphany for young students. They enter in awe of a renowned personality, but what they then experience are his concern, his genuine interest in them, and his humanity. They realize that he cares about them. As one student said,

The greatest trait that I value in professors is their ability to talk *with* their students, rather than *to* the students. Professor Wiesel undoubtedly has better things to do, rather than meet with a bunch of college kids for an hour or so every week. But he does anyway because he has an obvious love for teaching.

Over and over again, his students have echoed this sentiment, relating to me a sense of true appreciation and gratitude for his time, for his listening to what they have to say when, surely, or so they believe, he has more important things to do. But they quickly learn that for him there is nothing more important than they are. For his students he is a role model like no other they have met, for he is in the world, teaching them not just to do as he *says* but also to do as he *does*, that is, to help make the world a better place.

One sees that “better place” in microcosm in his classroom. As one student related,

There is not a second of rudeness in his class [which she pointed out was not the case in her other classes]. . . . He set the tone. . . . [I]t was the most civil class in my life. . . . [M]oreover, out of respect and love of Elie Wiesel, students are always well-prepared and respectful of each other.

Sheila, a music teacher on sabbatical leave from her junior high school and a student in Wiesel’s course, “The Philosophy and Literature of Friendship,” observed that the teacher/student relationship was a

metaphor for “ideal friendship”: “in the Ideal, love brings you together, respect pulls you apart, not in a negative sort of way, but you must not overstep your bounds. If it’s right, there’s always a tension, like a beautiful note played on a string.” This “ideal” is what she experienced in his classroom. She described him as “the image of the most gracious scholar who brings the past, the future, and the present together. He is bridging generations.” She believes that “Wiesel is the epitome of what a teacher should be: he cares for your intellect; he wants you to stretch, to see things in new lights.” After twenty-five years as a teacher herself, Sheila said that for her own soul, taking his class was the most important thing she could have done; she needed to experience his passion; she wanted to bring that passion to *her* students: “How many times are we treated to the presence of a truly holy person?” As for an individual appointment with Wiesel, she reported, “When I went into his office, he was fixing a part of me that I didn’t know was broken; he knew more than I did about myself.”

A mentor generally leads one step by step, showing the way by holding one’s hand. When students ask what they can do to make a difference in the world, Wiesel will rarely give them precise instructions, telling them more often to do something, *anything*, to start somewhere, *anywhere*. And they do. They volunteer to teach English to Russian immigrants; they participate in the “Walk against Hunger,” raising money to feed the poor; they organize projects on behalf of Bosnia relief; they work to improve Christian-Jewish relations; they work for human rights; they become Peace Corps volunteers; they go to Israel to work on a kibbutz; they participate in social action at Boston University or in their churches or synagogues; they enter graduate programs in the social sciences or professional schools of law and medicine; they become teachers. But these worthwhile endeavors aside, most importantly, they become better human beings: people who care about a hungry child, a destitute mother, or a faltering father. They learn to care about the dignity of their fellow human beings. Even a student going into the world of business goes with a different sensitivity for his fellow human being than one who did not study with Wiesel.

Students say that his classes are like nothing else they have experi-

enced in all their years at university. His courses have subtitles such as “The Literature of Persecution,” “Suicide and Literature,” “Franz Kafka’s Exile and Memory,” “Fear and Melancholy in Hasidism,” “Exile and Redemption,” “Biblical Attitudes Toward Suffering,” “Literature of Castastrophe,” “The Power of the Story,” and “The Inner Journey: To Despair or Madness and Back.” But all share the same general title: “Literature of Memory.” Students read Job, Ecclesiastes, and other biblical selections; they read Camus, Kafka, Goethe, Euripides, Shakespeare, Plato, Nietzsche, Rabbi Nachman, Sylvia Plath, Mary Shelley, Cynthia Ozick, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. They study Jewish sources and Islamic poetry. These reading lists draw on the breadth of their teacher’s knowledge and interests, spanning biblical, classical, and modern times. No political messages or exhortations are given, yet they are heard again and again in the injunction never to turn away from a hungry child, from a lonely man, from a weeping mother. Students are taught that violence is not the answer.

Most of all, they have the opportunity to study with a man who is himself engaged in effecting change, an individual who is living proof that *one man can make a difference*. His students know that Wiesel is a player on the world stage. When he comes on the scene, others stop and listen. When he speaks, they are moved by his eloquence. Always quiet, gentle, exquisitely well-manned, often poetic, he delivers a message that can bring his listener to tears, to laughter, to action—always on behalf of humanity, never against it. Sometimes, after one of his large lectures (to an audience of hundreds, if not more, of rapt listeners), I have felt that each one there could rise and move mountains. And certainly they believe that *he* can. As he wrote in his Nobel acceptance speech in 1986,

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism and political persecution. . . . Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can one not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere. (17)

In the same speech he said, “Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe” (16). He inspires his students to action. Beyond the given subject matter in a particular semester, he makes them feel not only that they can make a difference, but also that they *must*.

When his students finish a course with him, they understand that they are as important to their professor as he is to them, that he seeks their advice and wants to learn from them as much as they from him. He has taught them to respect each other, to listen carefully to one another, to treat each other kindly. They in turn have become more sensitive to each other’s traditions. Their professor, coming from the talmudic tradition, values their questions, stating frequently that while there are not always answers, questions are what count.

Clearly, Wiesel’s impact on his students is deep and permanent. Who are they? Where do they come from? Why do they come? With what do they leave? Jew and Gentile, Hindu and Muslim, Buddhist and Mormon, they come from the Far East, North and South America, the Middle East, Europe, South Africa, India, and Pakistan. They come from as many states in America as are represented at Boston University. They are studying the physical and natural sciences, psychology, history, religion, philosophy, English, political science, business administration, theology, communications, creative writing, French literature, and anthropology. They dream of becoming musicians, actors, engineers, artists, doctors, lawyers, businessmen and women, social workers, ministers, rabbis, and, of course, teachers. Some sign up for his courses simply because they have heard he is a “celebrity,” or perhaps they have seen him on television or read his name in the newspaper.

For by far, Wiesel is the most renowned member of Boston University’s faculty today. Some students have read his books; some come because their parents have told them that they must take a course with Wiesel before they graduate, some because a parent or grandparent is a Holocaust survivor and their children or grandchildren have heard sto-

ries of the camps. For others the opposite is the case: survivor relatives will not speak of Auschwitz, and students believe that Wiesel will answer their questions and unlock the mystery that has burdened them since early childhood.

Regardless of their reasons for enrolling, when the door opens at the first class meeting, a hush comes over the classroom. Some students are awestruck in the beginning, but Wiesel swiftly puts them at ease, making perfectly clear that he is not an icon but very human. He is funny; he smiles; he tells a joke here and there; and he clearly loves to tell a good story. Sneeze, and one will get a “God bless you” from him. His warmth and humility spread over the classroom.

Some years ago when he was to turn sixty, I contacted as many of his former students as I could find, asking them to contribute to a volume of letters as a gift for him. Their responses revealed a loving memory of a teacher who had given them much during their formative years as undergraduate and graduate students. They sent photos of their wives or husbands and their children. They wrote moving tributes. I asked a few of them for permission to share their responses here.

Janet Schenk McCord wrote,

The bond that forms between any teacher and student is a special one. The tension established is a reciprocal one; it grows and changes as the needs grow and change; but always, once established, the bond holds. Tangible, yet not, it results ultimately in the education of both teacher and student. You challenge me always to look more carefully and critically at the world, to raise the questions, to seek out the meanings, to draw the meanings together and analyze them. To collect the injustices, to call them by name, even when doing so is painful. As my teacher you are a guide, a comfort, a prod, and always you are there as support. And through it all you manage to make me feel as though I have done it all on my own.

When Janet was a doctoral student in the University Professors Pro-

gram, she was Wiesel's teaching fellow. Dr. McCord is now a member of the faculty at Marian College in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, teaching Wiesel's work.

Sister Marygrace Peters said,

“Auschwitzean” anger does not possess him. Neither forgotten nor neglected, the torment and tears forge their way into a world that must remember the life to which it has been called.

New generations are challenged to immerse themselves into what seems to be a sea of inexhaustible suffering, one to which literary genius attests, and submerged there, they are urged to uncover the meaning of hope.

Bloodless neutrality is inconceivable. Instead, the distressing inward cry is transformed, the artificial borders are shattered by words, words that are read and written and spoken ever so gently. Tumors invasive to the human spirit implode and the residue is excised within the discourse of the sacred space that is his classroom.

David Lubars remarked,

Here was a man who had been honored by presidents, who was internationally known for his uncompromising moral stances, who had written some of the most important books and papers of the 20th century.

But I think we loved him because he never acted like he did.

In later years, David's father, Walter Lubars, a retired professor and former dean of Boston University's College of Communications, has become one of Wiesel's perennial students, saying that after he took his first course with Wiesel, he became “addicted” and now in his retirement looks forward to being enrolled in course after course.

Joseph Kanofsky wrote,

Elie Wiesel's classes are always conducted on two levels. They con-

concentrate not only on the meaning of the text at hand, but also emphasize its lesson for humankind. The passionate intellect Professor Wiesel conveys kindles a flame of the same nature in his students. Previous illusions are dissected, prejudices exposed, and attitudes reshaped. One cannot participate in Elie Wiesel's class and not be profoundly changed.

And yet—this is often the case when one studies with great men.

Joseph, having followed Janet McCord as Wiesel's teaching fellow, earned a Ph.D. and is now a rabbi.

Another rabbi, Barry Blum, observed,

To study with [Professor] Wiesel is an adventure into the depths of melancholy and despair while at the same time appreciating the rich legacy of Judaism which has survived throughout the centuries. He testified to the great evils of humanity, yet is able to express the profound hope in human survival.

Barbara Helfgott-Hyett, now a poet, stated,

My story is simply one of many. Elie Wiesel is a teacher of such stature, modesty, and grace that only the Bible provides his proper likeness. Not a single one of his students is unchanged; our lives wrapped inextricably in his, and by his, all of us moving outward toward something we can only begin to comprehend. Each of us yearns to be, for him, a kind of David whose voice, our teacher tells us, "alone can dispense the darkness in Saul."

Susan Dodd, a novelist, commented,

I am indebted to Elie Wiesel beyond expressing. I wanted to be a writer from childhood. Yet it was not until I was blessed by this wonderful teacher's influence, example, and encouragement that . . . I found the courage and hope to try.

Riki Lippitz, a cantor, noted,

I came to you as a student, but I left you as a teacher. This is, perhaps, the most precious gift you could have shared. . . . If I have a wish, it is that my children will know what it is to learn at your feet. May they learn your gentleness, your stubbornness and your wisdom.

Patty McAndrews responded,

My debt to you is great. I learned that questions are important and that due to their very nature need to be asked. A question unasked is like a story untold. I learned that answers are neither quick nor easy and often do not come in a recognizable form. Perhaps the greatest learning was a reaffirmation of something I knew before. . . . If we truly see others as human beings and not as objects somehow disconnected from ourselves then injustice, inhumanity and genocides are far less likely to happen. If I am connected to you then I cannot hurt you without hurting myself. If you cry, then I taste salt. We are completely interdependent.

Surely the torch has been passed to Patty, who after becoming a campus minister spread her teacher's message at a Catholic college.

A nun sent a letter which included these remarks:

Of course, you always remain in my thoughts and prayers, but as the events of the terrible 50th anniversary (the liberation of Auschwitz) came and went and the news coverage featured you so prominently, the memories of those marvelous days of privilege for me in your classroom flooded my mind. . . . This is just to let you know once more how sacred the experience was for me, and how appreciative I am. The example you set continues to inspire me to strive for excellence in teaching.

These words came from Stanley Jacobs:

Before taking Professor Wiesel's class, I felt indifferent toward Judaism. I was a Jew, and I was content neither to understand nor investigate what it meant to be a Jew. Professor Wiesel shook me from my complacency and left me feeling uneasy with this decision. . . . [He] made me realize that I was part of a three-thousand-year-old tradition that had witnessed an incredible history: sadness and joy, beauty and ugliness, triumph and tragedy. As a part of this tradition I not only have a responsibility to my past, but to my future; I have the responsibility to bear witness to my people, a responsibility which I share with Moses, Rabbi Akiba, and Professor Wiesel.

One student finds his identity as a Jew and learns about the importance of becoming a witness, of carrying on where Wiesel leaves off. This example may be multiplied by many others over the years who in coming to study with Wiesel take away more than they imagined. They come to learn; not only do they acquire knowledge, but they also find a part of themselves—Jewish or not.

One also sees spiritual growth in students other than those who find a deeper and specifically *Jewish* identity. A Hawaiian student, Kalama, said,

Professor Wiesel, a leader in the Jewish community and one with a firm grounding in the Jewish tradition, stands true to his beliefs without offending students of other backgrounds . . . the unshakable belief he has in his religion couples a great respect for other religions. In this sense, he serves as a model for his students: he encourages them to seek out who *they* are, *spiritually*, while respecting the differences in religion and spirituality of others.

Kalama took another point from his lessons with Wiesel which he transmitted eloquently to me:

One of the reasons I hold a profound respect for Professor Wiesel is because he, unlike many others, was able to take the personal tragedy of his life and use it to help others. Many people allow

their experiences to embitter them. After a period of silence, Professor Wiesel confronted his past and successfully tried to understand what happened. He then shared his story with others, and instilled in them hope for a better world as well as the courage to share their own stories. In short, by confronting the past, he overcame the tragedy of his life, and helped others to help themselves.

Finally, Matt, speaking from the Roman Catholic tradition, felt that he had met a “living saint” when he walked into Wiesel’s office: “It had the peaceful air of a sacred place, like a cathedral.” He felt that by touching the big questions that others would shy away from in a classroom, Wiesel’s students are challenged and prepared more realistically for whatever they are going to do in their lives. No one who has studied with Wiesel is given the message that there are simple answers. Matt also was deeply impressed by Wiesel’s habit of never being afraid to say, “I don’t know.” He said, “A friend of mine, who is an admirer and colleague of Professor Wiesel’s at Boston University, a professor of philosophy and physics, told me, ‘The highest courage is to *bear* living with incomplete knowledge.’” Matt had studied under many professors who were unable to confess that they “didn’t know.” Wiesel was different. He could, and often did, say that he didn’t know the answer, that a question could remain a question.

For his part, Wiesel takes his teaching very seriously. Once, when François Mitterrand called him to Paris unexpectedly, he asked me to arrange a telephone hook-up for his seminar so that he could speak to his students during the class hour he would be missing. So from Paris he set the tone for the day, opening discussion on the book they were studying that morning. His students thus learn quickly how much they mean to him. On this day they knew what an effort he had made on their behalf. More often, ironically, they do not know what precedes his getting to his class on a given morning: he could have been flying halfway around the world to make it to his seminar on time. If a snowstorm might prevent him from flying into Boston from New York, then he will take the train.

Let me describe some of the students whose lives have been changed by their encounters with Wiesel. I have mentioned Janet Mc-

Cord but not her background: heading for a Master of Divinity degree and ordination in a Protestant denomination, she took one class with Wiesel in January 1979 and switched to a Master of Arts program. She decided against ordination and for Jewish studies and literature. Only years later did she embark on a path leading to a Ph.D., deciding to study seriously with Wiesel when she returned from Peace Corps service in Africa. As I mentioned, Janet became his devoted teaching assistant, and some seventeen years after her initial encounter with him, she received a Ph.D. in religion and literature. Her dissertation, "A Study of the Suicides of Eight Holocaust Survivor/Writers," was directed by Wiesel.

Fresh from an undergraduate degree in philosophy at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a young Californian with little or no religious background began a journey that led him to a serious appreciation of the Jewish tradition. In the process he became committed not only to religion but also to scholarship and teaching in his own right. Dr. Alan Rosen, also one of Wiesel's teaching fellows, once he had finished his Ph.D. studies, made aliyah. His home has become rich with Jewish song and ritual. A devoted teacher, he has taught in Israel since his arrival there.

A student at Boston University's School of Medicine made the time to take as many courses from Wiesel as she could in order to "humanize her studies in medicine." I believe that she, too, was seeking the richness of Jewish tradition that she found in the hours spent in his classroom. Beth Gordon and her husband Daniel completed their training in medicine after which they lived in Jerusalem for a year, studying Jewish history and philosophy before embarking on their medical careers and rearing their children. They continue to study and learn Jewish texts.

One of Wiesel's students in 1977, coming from India, began immediately to consider herself a disciple, calling herself his "Hindu *hasid*," truly his devoted follower. For five years, Shuma was his teaching assistant. She then became a Unitarian minister. She never stopped regarding him as a teacher who to this day continues to inspire her, even though they are no longer in regular contact.

There was also the pregnant law student who would not miss a class. Her baby was born—as luck would have it—between one class and the next week’s session. She brought her newborn son to class, a mere forty hours after giving birth, so she would not miss a day with Wiesel.

There was Reinhold Boschki, a young Catholic theology student from Germany who corresponded with Wiesel for many months. Then, he simply turned up in my office one August day, saying that he had come to study with Wiesel. After reading *Night*, a copy of which a friend had given him, he altered not only his course of study but also his life: he *had* to come and study with Wiesel, and that study became the path on which his life would move from then on. How did his life change? Not only did he become one of Wiesel’s devoted students, but he also changed the topic of his dissertation, producing *Der Schrei: Gott und Mensch im Werk von Elie Wiesel* (1994), the first book written on the work and message of Wiesel in German. After the publication of his dissertation, he translated several of Wiesel’s books from French into German. Reinhold is committed to spreading the words and teachings of his teacher to both young and old in Germany. In fact, in an effort to combat ignorance and racism and to make a difference in his country, he organized an international conference in 1995, commemorating fifty years since D-Day. His idea was to touch young teachers on this occasion by giving them access to Wiesel’s message.

A few more examples of the dedication of this master teacher’s students are in order. Carrie traveled on a train two hours each way to study with him. A student at Brown University, she had heard him speak in Birkenau when, as a high school student, she participated in the “March of the Living.” Her classmates at Brown could not understand her commitment, but she talked to me of the “aura” Wiesel brought to a classroom that was filled with his presence as well as with reverence and love. She spoke of his gift for creating an atmosphere where everyone felt comfortable. She also spoke of his “incredible passion”—for literature, philosophy, religion, humankind, *life*. His infinite passion was definitely contagious, she said. She felt that he made her feel as if there were nothing a human being, nothing she, could not do: “My generation is a sadly cynical one—Elie Wiesel’s passion for life

melts the cynicism away.”

A student of violin, Julie on leave from Oberlin Conservatory came to Boston University’s School of Music for one year. Hearing that Wiesel was on the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts, she enrolled in his Holocaust literature class in the spring of 1982. The following summer, she was a Tanglewood Fellow, studying under some of the world’s greatest conductors who came to work with the Boston Symphony and students in residence. Assigned to perform as first violinist in the technically challenging Sixth String Quartet by Béla Bartók, Julie did not realize how emotionally charged this would be for her following her study with Wiesel. Her chamber music coach, Eugene Lehner, was himself a Hungarian who had fled his country in 1939 when anti-Jewish laws went into effect. Lehner has been a member of the Kolisch Quartet, for whom this piece was composed during those turbulent times.

Hearing of Bartók’s own escape and knowing of Lehner’s, Julie underwent an even more intense professional experience because she had just completed a semester with Wiesel. Through his very being as well as the lessons he taught in that particular class, he had deeply changed Julie. She told me that although she was only twenty-two at the time, she sensed as well as feared that the playing of this Bartók piece might be the musical highlight of her career, and she owed that in part to Wiesel. Bartók’s Sixth String Quartet is a farewell to all that was, and in her course that spring Julie had just studied with someone who understood all of that: he had lived “all that was.”

The significance of the piece was much greater to her for having read Holocaust literature, which Wiesel has called the “literature of hope.” The music includes a farewell filled with profound sadness. A sad slow melody begins each movement, but, interestingly, Bartók concludes the composition with a tiny simple phrase ending on a major chord, which, as in Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” in his Ninth Symphony, leaves one optimistic, if not filled with joyful feelings. Julie’s is obviously a story that goes beyond Wiesel’s classroom. She said that for her everything converged: literature, history, music, and personalities—Wiesel, Lehner, and Bartók. But her musical experience would

never have been as meaningful had she not studied with Wiesel. She shared this story with me thirteen years after it took place, and even then she had tears in her eyes in the retelling.

I return to that phrase, “more than a mentor.” What do I really mean? Over the years, unsolicited manuscripts—poetry, essays, and novels—arrived from people unknown to Wiesel, asking for his advice: “Can you help me”; “Is it any good?” Always, an encouraging word was sent in response. Years later, books would arrive with letters from their authors, thanking Wiesel for his support and his belief in them. They said that with his brief words of encouragement, they continued to write, to bring their projects to fruition, to find a publisher. Isn’t this being “more than a mentor?” Doesn’t this paint a picture of a person who inspires, who by a single word of encouragement, of advice, enables others to do their best? Remember: these people never even met Wiesel, yet something magical somehow occurred. Here is a man who can, just by being who he is and with a simple good word, help aspiring writers to believe in themselves so that work begun can be completed—this is what I mean by “more than a mentor.” Whether it is a matter of his own students at the university or unknown and unpublished writers, Wiesel inspires and encourages them all.

Often, young schoolchildren write individual letters in response to *Night*, but more often they write as part of a class because their teacher assigned the book. From eleven to eighteen years old, many seem shaken by this memoir. They identify with the adolescent pain it portrays. Somehow, through his specific and horrific experience, Wiesel gives voice to young people’s deepest feelings and fears, unlocking their own stories from the death of a parent to tales of sexual abuse. Those stories are completely unrelated to Wiesel’s or, for that matter, to the Holocaust; even so, they need to share them and to relate how *his* traumatic tale has helped them get through *theirs*. I find this striking.

Two examples from high school students must suffice. The first writes, “You are an inspiration to me. I admire you for your success, determination, but mostly for your strength. People like you help bring peace into this scary world. You are a leader and teacher to all.”

The second attests,

And now I know that the story of victims who have perished is a true story, and how awful it is to be silent when human lives are endangered, when human beings are humiliated and suffer. The most important thing I realized is that it is an offence to persecute people because of their race, religion, or political views. Thank you for your book. It set me thinking about human life and a goal of my own life.

The man who inspired these and so many other responses like them answers every one, signing in his own hand each reply and often inviting the students to come and study with him at Boston University. Some do come, years later, excited by the chance to study with a teacher who has already become their mentor through his written word in *Night*.

In 1973 on the radio broadcast *Eternal Light*, Wiesel commented on his teachers in words that could easily have been uttered by his own students:

If I speak of gratitude, if I feel gratitude, it is certainly because I had teachers who taught me that words are links, that tales are instruments of communication between man and himself, between man and his neighbor, between man and God. God Himself needs words to create, to create man and give meaning to his existence. ("My")

In another broadcast that same year, he said:

To be Jewish is to take a question and turn it into an offering. To be Jewish is to take some fear that is yours and open it up and give it to others, simply to prove that communication is possible, simply to prove that the same fear threatens us all. We are all part of the same generation, Jews and non-Jews. We have the same enemy, face the same menace. To be Jewish is to be human. To be human

is to see what others see, to share one's vision with others, to try to break one's solitude, the worst enemy of man today. ("Now")

I believe that in what he offers his students Wiesel is fulfilling the mission he describes in *A Jew Today* (1978), where he says that a Jew's mission is "never to make the world Jewish, but rather to make it more human" (21). We see him in his classroom, surrounded by young people, a master teacher filled with humanity, love, hope, and joy. His students will carry the torch; they will be the bearers of truth and memory.

WORKS CITED

- Bartók, Béla. String Quartet No. 6 in D major.
- Beethoven, Ludwig von. Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125.
- Boschki, Reinhold. *Der Schrei: Gott und Mensch im Werk von Elie Wiesel*. Mainz: Mattias-Grünewald, 1994.
- McCord, Janet Schenk. "A Study of the Suicides of Eight Holocaust Survivor/Writers." Diss. Boston U., 1995.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. [Benjamin Jewett]. *Five Great Dialogues*. New York: Walter J. Black, 1942. 221-495.
- Wiesel, Elie. *The Accident*. Trans. Anne Borchardt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962.
- . *Dawn*. Trans. Frances Frenaye. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.
- . *A Jew Today*. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Random House, 1978.
- , narr. "My Teachers." *Eternal Light*. Part I. NBC. 1 Apr. 1973.
- . *Night*. Trans. Stella Rodway. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.
- . "The Nobel Acceptance Speech." *Elie Wiesel: The Nobel Peace Prize 1986*. New York: Summit Books, 1986. 15-18.
- , narr. "Now." *Eternal Light*. Part IV. NBC. 22 Apr. 1973.
- . *One Generation After*. Trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel. New York: Random House, 1970.
- . *The Testament*. Trans. Marion Wiesel. New York: Summit Books, 1981.