Elie Wiesel, The Perils of Indifference Speech

Background:

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, gave this impassioned speech in the East Room of the White House on April 12, 1999, as part of the Millennium Lecture series, hosted by President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In the summer of 1944, as a teenager in Hungary, Elie Wiesel, along with his father, mother and sisters, were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz extermination camp in occupied Poland. Upon arrival there, Wiesel and his father were selected by SS Dr. Josef Mengele for slave labor and wound up at the nearby Buna rubber factory.

Daily life included starvation rations of soup and bread, brutal discipline, and a constant struggle against overwhelming despair. At one point, young Wiesel received 25 lashes of the whip for a minor infraction.

In January 1945, as the Russian Army drew near, Wiesel and his father were hurriedly evacuated from Auschwitz by a forced march to Gleiwitz and then via an open train car to Buchenwald in Germany, where his father, mother, and a younger sister eventually died.

Wiesel was liberated by American troops in April 1945. After the war, he moved to Paris and became a journalist then later settled in New York. Since 1976, he has been Andrew Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. He has received numerous awards and honors including the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He was also the Founding Chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial. Wiesel has written over 40 books including Night, a harrowing chronicle of his Holocaust experience, first published in 1960.

At the White House lecture, Wiesel was introduced by Hillary Clinton who stated, "It was more than a year ago that I asked Elie if he would be willing to participate in these Millennium Lectures...I never could have imagined that when the time finally came for him to stand in this spot and to reflect on the past century and the future to come, that we would be seeing children in Kosovo crowded into trains, separated from families, separated from their homes, robbed of their childhoods, their memories, their humanity."
Elie Wiesel- “The Perils of Indifference”

1. Mr. President, Mrs. Clinton, members of Congress, Ambassador Holbrooke, Excellencies, friends: Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian Mountains woke up, not far from Goethe's beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again.

2. Liberated a day earlier by American soldiers, he remembers their rage at what they saw. And even if he lives to be a very old man, he will always be grateful to them for that rage, and also for their compassion. Though he did not understand their language, their eyes told him what he needed to know -- that they, too, would remember, and bear witness.

3. And now, I stand before you, Mr. President – Commander-in-Chief of the army that freed me, and tens of thousands of others -- and I am filled with a profound and abiding gratitude to the American people...

4. We are on the threshold of a new century, a new millennium. What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium? Surely it will be judged, and judged severely... These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity: two World Wars, countless civil wars, the senseless chain of assassinations -- Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Sadat, Rabin -- bloodbaths in Cambodia and Nigeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo; the inhumanity in the gulag and the tragedy of Hiroshima. And, on a different level, of course, Auschwitz and Treblinka. So much violence, so much indifference.

5. What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil...

6. Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?

7. Of course, indifference can be tempting -- more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.

8. Over there, behind the black gates of Auschwitz, the most tragic of all prisoners were the "Muselmanner," as they were called. Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lie on the ground, staring vacantly into space, unaware of who or where they were, strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did not know it....

9. Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by humanity then was not the ultimate. We felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God...
than an indifferent one. For us to be ignored by God was a harsher punishment than to be a victim of His anger. Man can live far from God -- not outside God. God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering.

10. In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony, one does something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it. Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.

11. Indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own.

12. Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. And this is one of the most important lessons of this outgoing century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

13. In the place that I come from, society was composed of three simple categories: the killers, the victims, and the bystanders...

14. And our only miserable consolation was that we believed that Auschwitz and Treblinka were closely guarded secrets; that the leaders of the free world did not know what was going on behind those black gates and barbed wire; that they had no knowledge of the war against the Jews that Hitler's armies and their accomplices waged as part of the war against the Allies.

15. If they knew, we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to intervene. They would have spoken out with great outrage and conviction. They would have bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once.

16. And now we knew, we learned, we discovered that the Pentagon knew, the State Department knew. And the illustrious occupant of the White House ...

17. No doubt, [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] was a great leader. He mobilized the American people and the world, going into battle, bringing hundreds and thousands of valiant and brave soldiers in America to fight fascism, to fight dictatorship, to fight Hitler. And so many of the young people fell in battle. And, nevertheless, his image in Jewish history -- I must say it -- his image in Jewish history is flawed.

18. The depressing tale of the St. Louis is a case in point. Sixty years ago, its human cargo -- maybe 1,000 Jews -- was turned back to Nazi Germany. And that happened after the Kristallnacht, after the first state sponsored pogrom, with hundreds of Jewish shops destroyed, synagogues burned, thousands of people put in concentration camps. And that ship, which was already on the shores of the United States, was sent back.
19. I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help. Why didn't he allow these refugees to disembark? A thousand people -- in America, a great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?

20. But then, there were human beings who were sensitive to our tragedy. Those non-Jews, those Christians, that we called the "Righteous Gentiles," whose selfless acts of heroism saved the honor of their faith. Why were they so few? Why was there a greater effort to save SS murderers after the war than to save their victims during the war?

21. Why did some of America's largest corporations continue to do business with Hitler's Germany until 1942? It has been suggested, and it was documented, that the Wehrmacht could not have conducted its invasion of France without oil obtained from American sources. How is one to explain their indifference?

22. And yet, my friends, good things have also happened in this traumatic century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil, the demise of apartheid, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, the peace accord in Ireland. And let us remember the meeting, filled with drama and emotion, between Rabin and Arafat that you, Mr. President, convened in this very place. I was here and I will never forget it.

23. And then, of course, the joint decision of the United States and NATO to intervene in Kosovo and save those victims, those refugees, those who were uprooted by a man whom I believe that because of his crimes, should be charged with crimes against humanity. But this time, the world was not silent. This time, we do respond. This time, we intervene.

24. Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our experiences? Are we less insensitive to the plight of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far? Is today's justified intervention in Kosovo, led by you, Mr. President, a lasting warning that never again will the deportation, the terrorization of children and their parents be allowed anywhere in the world? Will it discourage other dictators in other lands to do the same?

25. What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably. When adults wage war, children perish. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, famine. Some of them -- so many of them -- could be saved.

26. And so, once again, I think of the young Jewish boy from the Carpathian Mountains. He has accompanied the old man I have become throughout these years of quest and struggle. And together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope.

Elie Wiesel - April 12, 1999

http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/wiesel.htm
Possible Discussion Questions

• Whenever a historian reads a primary document, the first questions they must ask themselves is: Who is the author’s audience and purpose? Who is Wiesel’s audience and why is he giving this speech?
• What is the central concept of his speech?
• How does he feel about indifference? Positively/Negatively/Sometimes it’s Necessary?
• Is this speech just intended for Americans?
• What are some examples of indifference? Was everyone indifferent?
• Is society getting better or are we still indifferent? What does Wiesel think? What do you think?
• Wiesel makes many references to the US? How does he feel about them? Then and now? Does it change?
• Is there any passage in particular that struck you as interesting/confusing/upsetting and wanted to discuss more?

Socratic Seminar Rubric
This rubric can be used by students to self-evaluate their participation in a seminar or by observers to evaluate a particular participant. This rubric breaks down some of the skills involved in seminars. They may help participants to identify particular areas of strength and areas for improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ADVANCED</th>
<th>SATISFACTORY</th>
<th>DEVELOPING</th>
<th>UNSATISFACTORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questioning</strong></td>
<td>• Has prepared several higher-level questions based on the text</td>
<td>• Has prepared questions, mostly lower level</td>
<td>• Has very few questions, if any</td>
<td>• Has not prepared questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asks several higher-level questions during the seminar</td>
<td>• Asks some questions during seminar</td>
<td>• Asks very few questions, if any</td>
<td>• Does not ask questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking</strong></td>
<td>• Moves the conversation forward</td>
<td>• Comments often, but does not lead others</td>
<td>• Emphasizes only own ideas</td>
<td>• Disruptive, argumentative</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Speaks to all participants</td>
<td>• Addresses only the teacher</td>
<td>• Addresses only the teacher</td>
<td>• Mumbles or is silent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thinks before answering</td>
<td>• Refers to text, but not to subtle points</td>
<td>• Tends toward debate, not dialogue</td>
<td>• Makes no connection to previous comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Refers directly to the text</td>
<td>• Responds to questions</td>
<td>• Ideas do not always connect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Makes connections to other speakers</td>
<td>• Considers some opinions</td>
<td>• Comments neglect details of text</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Considers all opinions</td>
<td>• Offers interesting ideas, not necessarily connected</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>• Demonstrates effective listening skills (making eye contact,</td>
<td>• May have some eye contact with speaker</td>
<td>• Rarely demonstrates effective listening skills</td>
<td>• No effective listening skills demonstrated</td>
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<td></td>
<td>nodding, taking notes)</td>
<td>• Takes some notes</td>
<td>(making eye contact, nodding, taking notes)</td>
<td>• Attempts to dominate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Writes down thoughts and questions</td>
<td>• Ignores others’ comments</td>
<td>• Loses track of conversation</td>
<td>• Interrupts speakers in middle of sentence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Builds on others’ comments</td>
<td>• Judges others’ ideas</td>
<td>• Repeats same ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Asks for clarification when needed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>• Identifies/highlights key words and phrases</td>
<td>• Identifies/highlights some key words and phrases</td>
<td>• No highlighting</td>
<td>• Unprepared, unfamiliar with text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Has notes of main ideas</td>
<td>• Has some notes</td>
<td>• Skims the text</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Very few notes, if any</td>
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