Learning hope from Elie Wiesel

By Bromleigh McCleneghan

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Elie Wiesel has died. Reading the obituaries, the thing that astounds me is the thing that has always astounded me: how young he was. Eighty-seven now, in 2016. I've been burying World War II veterans throughout my years of pastoral ministry. How could Wiesel only be 87?

He was a child during the war, a teenager, carted off to the camps with his family. He was orphaned there. His adolescence, rather than being a time of discovery and excitement, was filled with death and loss. He asked questions atypical for most who are so young: *Where is God? Why has God not prevented this? Why has the world not stepped forward?*

Wiesel's profound suffering and search for meaning shaped his life's work. I am grateful to say they also shaped my own. Wiesel was a writer, a public theologian, and a citizen of the world who worked tirelessly for peace; he was also a teacher.

There are many reasons I enrolled in the University Professors Program at Boston University as an undergrad, but the opportunity to study with multiple Nobel Laureates was not least among them. Professor Wiesel's classes were, of course, constantly full. I finally got into one my junior year.

There was summer reading, but I was undeterred. At my grandparents' lake house, I read Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* and learned about the Armenian genocide. On a stairclimber at the student athletic center, I read *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death,* by Albert Camus, and was moved by "Reflections on the Guillotine," his masterful critique of capital punishment.

The syllabus once the semester started was no lighter: *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families,* Philip Gourevitch's chronicle of the Rwandan genocide, and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; works by Shusaku Endo and Primo Levi; the stage plays *The Visit* and

Death and the Maiden. No continent, we learned, was immune to genocide. We joked that the course should have been called “Horrible Things People Do to Each Other.”

Wiesel’s constant enjoinder never to forget, to cast off the siren call of indifference, is—like Martin Luther King Jr.’s prophetic vision—often rendered simplistic and narrow. Having suffered through the Holocaust, Wiesel studied the contours of life and death for victims—but also for perpetrators and the societies that gave rise to them. His work was grounded in his experience in the concentration camps, but his concern was for humanity. Under his tutelage, we learned that no one has a monopoly on suffering; our compassion must be for everyone.

We also learned that things are often more complicated than we would like. My college roommate, human rights journalist Jina Moore, remembered this week that “maybe nothing was as influential as the argument [Wiesel] had, through us but with Primo Levi, against the idea that Nazis were monsters. It was too dangerous, and too untrue, to adopt a philosophy exclusive of the possibility (probability?) that any of us could become perpetrators. It's an extraordinary, demanding empathy.”

For Christians—for me—this was critically important. We have a nasty and persistent habit of categorizing certain others as sinners. Jesus was known to point this out, but even his authority hasn’t kept us from identifying the speck in our neighbor’s eye while ignoring the log in our own. This gospel insight, however, is not merely a call to observe the 11th American commandment *thou shalt not judge.* We are to see the evil in the world, to call it out and work against it. But we’re not going to do this effectively if we can’t see how ordinary people are moved to heroism or terror.

I’ll never forget the paper I wrote for that course. I used Friedrich Durrenmatt’s play *The Visit*, which tells of a rich woman who returns to her hometown and makes the townspeople an offer they can’t refuse, and Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You* to trace the steps of dehumanization necessary to justify murder or genocide. Genocide is evil, but it doesn’t just spring up from nowhere.

There is hope in that. Though, as one reporter noted, Wiesel always seemed to carry a saddened and wizened air, he called the world to remember out of hope: hope that if we could see the causes and patterns of violence, we could limit it. He lived in hope that we could prevent another Armenia, another Holocaust, another Bosnia, another Rwanda, another… His hope and conviction continued, even though we

continue to fail.

His own hope had limitations, as did his wisdom. He often supported Israel uncritically (though not always), and he was known to romanticize Jerusalem in ways some of the war-torn city's inhabitants found troubling.

The world needs people with the moral authority to speak and work against violence and genocide. Most of us will never have the kind of platform Wiesel commanded. But I learned as his student that the platform doesn't matter: ordinary people, working for good in whatever ways we can, and resisting the temptation to hatred and fear and evil in everything we do—this will make the difference. It always has, and it always will.