

Name: _____ Class: _____

Elie Wiesel's Nobel Acceptance Speech

By Elie Wiesel
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Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) was an American Jewish writer, professor, political activist, and Holocaust survivor. During World War II, Wiesel and his family were transported to a German concentration and extermination camp, where his parents and one of his sisters died. Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his work promoting human rights, and was called a "messenger to mankind" by the Nobel Committee. As you read, take notes on the imagery Wiesel uses in his speech.

[1] It is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor you have chosen to bestow upon me. I know: your choice transcends¹ me. This both frightens and pleases me.

It frightens me because I wonder: do I have the right to represent the multitudes who have perished? Do I have the right to accept this great honor on their behalf?... I do not. That would be presumptuous.² No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions.

It pleases me because I may say that this honor belongs to all the survivors and their children, and through us, to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified.

I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish.³ It all happened so fast. The ghetto.⁴ The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.



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[5] I remember: he asked his father: "Can this be true?" This is the 20th century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?

And now the boy is turning to me: "Tell me," he asks. "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"

1. **Transcend (verb):** to rise above or go beyond
2. **Presumptuous (adjective):** too confident, especially in a way that is rude
3. **Anguish (noun):** severe mental or physical pain and suffering
4. a section of a city in which Jews were forced to live

And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naive we were, that the world did know and remain silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. 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.

Of course, since I am a Jew profoundly rooted in my peoples' memory and tradition, my first response is to Jewish fears, Jewish needs, Jewish crises. For I belong to a traumatized generation, one that experienced the abandonment and solitude of our people. It would be unnatural for me not to make Jewish priorities my own: Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jews in Arab lands... But there are others as important to me. Apartheid⁵ is, in my view, as abhorrent⁶ as anti-Semitism.⁷ To me, Andrei Sakharov's⁸ isolation is as much of a disgrace as Josef Biegun's⁹ imprisonment. As is the denial of Solidarity and its leader Lech Walesa's¹⁰ right to dissent. And Nelson Mandela's¹¹ interminable¹² imprisonment.

[10] There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism, and political persecution, writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and by the Right. Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. And then, too, there are the Palestinians to whose plight¹³ I am sensitive but whose methods I deplore.¹⁴ Violence and terrorism are not the answer. Something must be done about their suffering, and soon. I trust Israel, for I have faith in the Jewish people. Let Israel be given a chance, let hatred and danger be removed from her horizons, and there will be peace in and around the Holy Land.

Yes, I have faith. Faith in God and even in His creation. Without it no action would be possible. And action is the only remedy to indifference: the most insidious¹⁵ danger of all. Isn't this the meaning of Alfred Nobel's¹⁶ legacy? Wasn't his fear of war a shield against war?

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5. the policy of racial segregation and discrimination in South African between 1948 and 1991
 6. **Abhorrent (adjective):** inspiring disgust and hatred
 7. hostility, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews
 8. Andrei Sakharov was a Russian nuclear physicist and activist for peace and human rights. He was sent to internal exile from 1980 to 1986. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975.
 9. Josef Biegun was a political prisoner in Soviet-era Russia who was jailed because his advocacy for Russian Jews was deemed "anti-Soviet."
 10. Lech Wasela led the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. He was arrested for labor organizing several times.
 11. Nelson Mandela was a South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, politician, and philanthropist who served 27 years in prison.
 12. **Interminable (adjective):** endless or apparently endless
 13. **Plight (noun):** a dangerous or difficult situation
 14. **Deplore (verb):** to feel or express strong disapproval of something
 15. **Insidious (adjective):** appealing but waiting to trap; producing a harmful effect that develops gradually
 16. the founder of the Nobel Prize

There is much to be done, there is much that can be done. One person — a Raoul Wallenberg,¹⁷ an Albert Schweitzer,¹⁸ one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident¹⁹ is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude. No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

Thank you, Chairman Aarvik. Thank you, members of the Nobel Committee. Thank you, people of Norway, for declaring on this singular occasion that our survival has meaning for mankind.

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17. Raoul Wallenberg saved tens of thousands of Jews in Nazi-occupied Hungary by issuing protective passports and offering shelter. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, but never won.
 18. Albert Schweitzer was a French-German musician, philosopher, and physician who was awarded the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize for his work in philosophy.
 19. **Dissident (noun):** a person who opposes official policy, especially that of an authoritarian state

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the speech?
 - A. Memory of past injustices motivate the work of most leaders.
 - B. The victims of unjust treatment must be honored and respected.
 - C. Never remain silent in the face of injustice.
 - D. Over time, the world has become more just.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I remember: he asked his father: 'Can this be true? This is the 20th century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed?'" (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "To me, Andrei Sakharov's isolation is as much of a disgrace as Josef Biegun's imprisonment. As is the denial of Solidarity and its leader Lech Walesa's right to dissent. And Nelson Mandela's interminable imprisonment." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "And action is the only remedy to indifference: the most insidious danger of all." (Paragraph 11)

3. Which statement best describes how Wiesel addresses the impact of his Jewish identity on his perspective?
 - A. Wiesel shares that his Jewish identity causes him focus only on injustices occurring in Jewish communities.
 - B. Wiesel acknowledges that he has been unable to engage with the memory of his past because the Holocaust was too painful.
 - C. Wiesel asserts that he will always concentrate on Jewish suffering as a result of his identity, but other suffering is just as worthy of attention.
 - D. Wiesel criticizes the use of violence by Palestinians because he does not believe that they are suffering, rather, they are looking for an excuse to harm Israel.

4. Which statement best describes how paragraph 4 develops the tone of the speech?
 - A. By describing the Holocaust, Wiesel introduces a somber and introspective tone.
 - B. By describing a young boy, Wiesel injects a hopeful and optimistic tone.
 - C. Wiesel explains the horrors of the Holocaust, which develops a grim tone in the speech.
 - D. Wiesel's impassioned descriptions create an urgent tone as he builds to a call to action.

5. How does paragraph 12 develop Wiesel's message?
