

Elie Wiesel “Learning and Respect”

Commencement speech at DePaul University Chicago, Illinois June 15, 1997

Mr Wiesel once wrote "...to remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all." He is the author of 36 works dealing with Judaism, the Holocaust, and the moral responsibility of all people to fight hatred, racism and genocide. Born in Romania, he was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize for Peace.

Reverend President, Rabbi Furman, clergy, distinguished members of the faculties, deans, parents, friends, and students; to be honored by this very great university is special to me, a Jew who comes from far away. When I was young, I was afraid of whatever had to do with Christianity. It inspired only fear in me. I have learned since, that every religion, and those who believe in it, are to be respected and not feared. Therefore, today, I find it symbolic that we are here--you students and I, still a student although I have been a teacher--trying to see in each other, not strangers, but fellow sojourners who try to transcend all that separates human beings from one another. We are all still learning eternal truth from the same books. You have worked hard for four years. You have spent many sleepless nights, either worrying about grades or worrying how to get up in the morning, having had too much fun. From now on, no more exams, no more apprehension. Still, I hope you will not stop being students. The fact that you will not have exams does not mean that you should not go on learning. You must continue to listen to Plato, or to Jeremiah, or both; you must continue to come closer to other fellow human beings, just as you have been closer here among yourselves or with your fine, inspiring teachers.

What do you take with you from here? A story, a formula, maybe a handshake, a special encounter, a friendship. What will remain except a diploma? Much must remain because when two persons meet, a mystery is born. Take that mystery and respect it, and if possible, invest it with more meaning, with more miraculous significance. The world outside is a cold world, a cynical world. I imagine that you will stumble upon the same difficulties that my students stumble upon, as I do, when we have to express our faith in books and their authors; when we have to believe that those whom we have elected are not cynical, not hypocrites, that they in truth are our representatives, in spite of what we read in the papers. That to be a civil servant, or a political representative anywhere, is still a noble vocation. We must believe that in spite of our limitations, you and I must realize that there isn't much we can do to act on history in its shaping up

for the next century. However, there are certain things we can do, and therefore, to paraphrase Kant, we must do. There are so many prisoners in the world. We cannot free all of them, maybe not even one. But one thing the prisoner always suffers from is feeling abandoned, feeling given up, that he or she doesn't count anymore--to anyone! That is our work. We must see to it that that prisoner should know that there is always one person, or one group, dealing with human rights--who thinks of him or her in prison. Those who are sick, who are prisoners of their disease, be they victims of Alzheimers--the worst of all diseases because it attacks identity--or patients with AIDS or cancer, or victims of poverty, despair, racism; they should know that they are not alone. If I cannot, and you cannot, cure and help all of them, or not even one of them, at least we can be present to them in their special situation, their condition of suffering.

You studied here in a Christian school. I know not all of you are Christians, but nevertheless the school is a Christian institution, and I applaud the school for having you. Because it shows its openness. It shows the emphasis on learning. Learning is the best antidote to and against ignorance and fanaticism and hatred. How is it that all racists are so stupid? To believe that because one has a different color of skin, or comes from a different ethnic origin, or belongs to a different religious group, one is superior or inferior is stupid. Learning is an antidote because when we learn, no matter who we are and where we come from, we still are marveling at the beauty of a sentence or cadence by Shakespeare, or an idea by Plato. Learning, therefore, is what brings people together. Continue to learn.

Furthermore, children. You have been young, younger, and soon you are going to have children, too. You must be responsible for the world into which these children are being brought. When adults make war, children die. Adults fight and children suffer. While you are here celebrating, rightly so, your great achievement, somewhere in the world, in Africa and Asia, every minute a child dies of hunger or disease. I repeat, every minute a child dies of hunger or disease. Don't you think that is scandalous? It is, because that can be helped. If only our governments all over the world could be aware of the weight of suffering of children. Dostoyevsky said, "If one child dies, it calls into question the existence of God." And I would say, if one child dies, it calls into question the humanity of the human being. You have learned the value of humanity,

that is the goal of learning--learning means to be sensitive--sensitive to other people's pain and suffering and joy and happiness. And when children die, and we do not do enough to save one child here and one child there, something is wrong with our humanity.

Furthermore, humiliation. Always remember, my good friends, that there is one sin we must never commit and it is to humiliate another person or to allow another person to be humiliated in our presence without us screaming and shouting and protesting. Learn that. Poverty is humiliation. There is absolutely no reason in the world why some people should be poor when we are not. Exclusion, discrimination, is humiliation. There is absolutely no reason in the world why I should be happier than anyone else, in my place, in my home, and in my work.

This is what you have learned here. And this is what you must remember. And ultimately, it also means to remember to fight fanaticism. I, as a Jew, believe that as a Jew I can give what I am, not only what I have, to those who are not Jewish. I do not believe that to be Jewish is superior or inferior or that my religion is superior or inferior to any other. I believe, therefore, that intolerance is the enemy of learning, and it is the enemy of progress, the enemy of humanity. Now what is the opposite of intolerance. Not tolerance. Tolerance is a word that has a condescending tone. "I tolerate you." The opposite of intolerance is respect. We must respect one another, not in spite of our differences, but because of our differences. I must respect the Christian for whatever he or she is, the Muslim for whatever he or she is, the agnostic for whatever he or she is. And I expect the same respect for me.

And in conclusion, I will tell you a story. Martin Buber was a great philosopher, some of you have studied him, probably in philosophy classes. He was one of the very first to believe in ecumenism, which means he always joined all the groups that brought Christians and Jews together. He was a religious existentialist, and the story is that once he came to address such a group of theologians. There were Jewish theologians and Christian theologians there. And he said to them, "My good friends, what is the difference between you and me? Both of us, all of us believe, because we are religious, in the coming of the Messiah. You believe that the Messiah came, went back, and that you are waiting for Him for the second coming. We Jews believe He hasn't come yet, but He will come. In other words, we are waiting. You for the second coming, we

for the first coming. Let's wait together." After a pause, he said, "And when He will come, we will ask Him, have you been here before?" Said Buber, "I hope I will be behind Him and I will whisper in His ear, please do not answer."

My good friends, we are all waiting. We are waiting, if not for the Messiah, as such, we are waiting for the messianic moment. And the messianic moment is what each and every one of us tries to build, meaning a certain area of humanity that links us to all those who are human and, therefore, desperately trying to fight despair as humanly as possible and--I hope--with some measure of success. I wish you years of joy, years of serenity, years of friendship. Thank you.

At its 99th Annual Commencement in June 1997, DePaul University was privileged to host five distinguished individuals who delivered the commencement address at each ceremony. Of particular note were the inspiring and challenging remarks of the Honorable Elie Wiesel at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences ceremony. Recognized as one of the most eloquent moral voices of the modern day, Professor Wiesel celebrated the achievements of the graduates, but also reminded them of their obligation to each other, to the world, and to the future. We are honored to reprint, in its entirety, Wiesel's challenge to us all.

The Honorable Elie Wiesel received a standing ovation from graduates and their guests at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences 99th Commencement ceremony on Sunday, June 15, 1997

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, Transylvania on September 30, 1928, into to a family belonging to the Hasidic sect of Judaism. During the early years of World War II, Sighet remained relatively unaffected by the war. However, in 1944 Elie and other Jews of the town were deported to Auschwitz and were separated from Elie's Mum and sister,. Elie Wiesel later learned that they had both died in the gas chambers.

Elie Wiesel had sworn that he would never write about his Holocaust experiences but in 1955 wrote *And the World Remained Silent*, influenced by the French Catholic novelist and Nobel laureate Francois Mauriac.

In the commencement speech at DePaul University, Elie Wiesel talks about intolerance. Intolerance as the real enemy of humanity. However, people ought not just tolerate each other, since toleration as connotations but rather respect each other as fellow people.