

Bearing Witness: Understanding Holocaust Testimony Within Urban High School Students' Lives

*Lynn Gourinski Fahr
Overbrook High School*

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Overview

The Holocaust of World War II continues to resonate through the years. In the years of 1933-1945, Adolf Hitler wreaked havoc upon Eastern Europe extinguishing many people, most of them Jewish. It is difficult to believe that the world allowed such a travesty. Often student's do not or cannot understand the time line of the events of World War II. (Scholastic.com) Millions of Jews lost their homes, their loved ones, and their lives. How can a teacher teach the unthinkable acts performed during this time and make it applicable to the lives of urban youth?

Night is a required reading novel in the freshman year of high school in the school district of Philadelphia. Elie Wiesel (b.1928, in Sighet, Transylvania—now part of Romania) was but a boy of 15 when his family was forced out of their home and into the streets to be packed with many others, into cattle railroad cars and ferried to the concentration camp, Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister, met with death in the gas chambers. His older sisters survived the nightmare. Elie and his dad were forced to move to Buchenwald where Elie Wiesel 's father died, in April 1945, a sad, hard-fought death from dysentery. Elie Wiesel never said goodbye to his father but survived to recount the tale of torture many years later to a foreign reporter, Francois Mauriac, while living in Tel Aviv. (Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity)

In 1979, a rather small grassroots group called the *Holocaust Survivors Film Project* found and interviewed over 4,400 witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust. Interviewing was focused on each person's leadership role during this horrific time and over 10,000 hours of interviews are recorded. These recordings were place in the safe keeping of Yale University in 1981 with the help of Hollywood director Steven Spielberg. (www.library.yale.edu) It is in these interviews and images of tortured souls, that students

can see other adults explain how they were bearing witness to living through World War II, surviving through the darkest of hours. These individuals were witnesses to atrocities that as children they will never forget. In sharing, they compel us to bear witness to change minds to prevent future Holocausts.

Students in today's urban student's lives seem to come straight out of Hollywood scripts, like "Boy's in the Hood" or "Basketball Diaries". Some of these children see death, drugs, and crime before they even leave the house. The streets they live on are riddled by bullets shot out of fast moving cars and their childhoods are shattered by violence at all too early an age. These students must tell their tales. Situations eat away at the heart of their childhood and stunt the growth of their adulthood. Children need an outlet: poetry, dance, skit/play, and video. Bearing witness and sharing their deep feelings without judgment will help them heal and not feel so isolated. It will allow students to learn compassion and empathy.

Rationale

This curriculum will be taught in the English 1 class during the required reading of Elie Wiesel's novel, *Night*. The Holocaust was the German persecution of 6 million Jews. The mass murder of Jews began in 1933 and did not stop until 1945 with the liberation of the concentration camps. The most efficient months of killing of Jews by the Nazis were April 1942-November of 1942. (Holocaust-tcr.org) The value the Jewish culture and tradition that had lasted 2000 years was dead by 1945. The term, "holocaust" is Greek meaning sacred fire. It was a state of Germany sponsored a systematic persecution and annihilation of millions of people deemed undesirable by German authority. Jews were the primary victims. Other perceived "radical inferiority" groups were the Roma or Gypsies, disabled, Slavic people like Poles and Russians, communists, socialists, Jehovah witnesses and homosexuals. (www.yadvashem.org)

The railroad system played a large part in the German army's ability to round up many people but by number, mostly Jews. The Jews came from Germany, Poland and countries surrounding Hitler's Germany. They were placed in concentration camps around Germany. (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org) It was in late January 1942 in Berlin, Germany at the Wannsee Conference that the final coordination was put annihilation of Jews was formulated. The Nazi regime estimated that about 11 million Jews were left to kill. These numbers came from neutral and non-occupied countries of Ireland, Sweden, Turkey, and Great Britain. Jews were to be deported from cities and sent to killing centers in Poland. In 1942, Jews were told they were going to labor camps but the reality was sending them to extermination camps. (<http://www.ushmm.org>)

Each railroad car, be it freight or passenger car, were packed and sealed shut from the outside. Rail cars were not that large for the vast number of people packed in

them. The interior of a car was about 26 feet 2 inches in area. The interior height was 7 feet 4 inches in the center of the car and 7 feet on the outside of the car. Deportees suffered from intense heat in the summer sun, extreme freezing temperatures in the winter, the foul stench of urine and human feces. A bucket was provided for relief of urine and feces but not emptied properly. No food or water was given in transport even if the travel would take days for camp arrival. (<http://www.ushmm.org>)

The book, *Night*, describes the firsthand account of an adolescent boy's journey from a peaceful home and to the chaos of a cattle car transport with his family during World War II. Being ripped away from his mother and sisters to navigate a ghastly concentration camp with only his father, Elie Wiesel bore witness first hand to the atrocities of World War II in a concentration camp, which included the death of his father.

The survivors never wanted revenge for the horror of the holocaust. They simply left the camps and rebuilt their lives with what Yad Vashem recalls, "new families forever under the shadow of those absent; new life stories, forever warped by the wounds; new communities forever haunted by the loss."

Bearing witness to atrocities is never easy. The Holocaust or Shoah (final solution) according to Yad Vashem (www.yadvashem.org) magnified and the world stage that tragedy is everyone's issue. Elie Wiesel claims, "For the survivors who chose to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of the past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time." (www.goodreads.com) Urban students will deal with the loss of family, friends, neighbors due to excessive violence in our cities. As educators, we cannot allow the stories of the people of our community to die along with the senseless actions that caused their deaths.

Teaching children to bear witness to the horrible situations they see and experience is vastly important. It teaches student's critical thinking skills and self-reflection skills to help them to make a connection between history and contemporary moral choices. It teaches children to challenge any preconceptions they may have of a group of people and forces them to understand the complex relationship between individual identity and that of their universal identity. By teaching students to bear witness to the Holocaust, teachers are allowing student's pathways to confront present concerns about loyalty, peer pressure, scapegoating, conformity and belonging.

Students must understand human control over their own behaviors. They must be encouraged to take a stand against evil or eventually risk forfeiting individual freedoms. Teachers must reinforce the idea that by abolishing the rights of one group, it can lead to

the abolishment of another group's beliefs. Children must believe that the behaviors of one person, can make a difference in the world.

In the world of today's urban adolescent, travesty is seen all too often. As educators we must teach and promote peace through education. Wiesel's voice resounds loud and clear when he says, "Those who remain silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow" (goodreads.com). We must provide a forum for our youth to navigate the difficult society of violence. We must give a voice and outlet for our urban students to deal with their own feelings of helplessness when violence occurs. "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." The reason we need to bear witness to such events in the lives of Elie Wiesel and our urban youth is to make a positive difference. Trauma will happen. We need to use every resource available to provide urban youth with the tool to tell the stories of the tormented souls and never forget the pain but learn a better way so another soul is not tortured in the future.

Objectives

While this unit is planned for grade 9 in an urban setting, it may be used in grades 7-10 depending on student levels of reading and comprehension. This book has a grade level equivalent of 8.7 and a lexile of 590L of a chapter book. (Scholastic.com) Lessons are designed for 55-minute classes and should last 4-5 days total. Lessons with the videos can be moved about the teaching of this book. Other videos are also available for use in reinforcing survival, bearing witness to traumatic experiences, and being a bystander as horror reigns.

Students will be able to compare and contrast Elie Wiesel and Father S and Paul D emotions surrounding survival and bearing witness. Each individual will be asked to analyze how the words create the tone and mood in *Night*. Children will illustrate how they are able to describe, evaluate and synthesize the testimony of Paul D. and Father S., the essential ideas of the text (1.1.11D). Many of the student emotions are bewilderment, guilt, and regret. Students will identify how each person bore witness to the atrocity of World War II and identify struggles of humanity through the years from "big" world events like the World Trade towers being terrorized. Each student will be asked to identify how their own witnessing of struggles compares and contrasts with survivor Paul D or Father S stories using a variety of media sources such as the Yale interviews (1.2.11B) Finally, students will be asked to write and demonstrate, with sharp focus, an incident to which they have bore witness (1.5.11A). As students work through the feelings of the characters in the story, those of Paul D. and Father S., a connection with written and illustrated understanding will culminate the lesson.

Strategies

Students will view Holocaust testimonies of Father S and of Paul D. Small conversation and large conversation will occur to examine what each Witness is describing. How did the Holocaust affect each of them? How did the Witness display the War's exploits?

Students will be journal writing as a means of expression, interpretive dance based set to music, and poetry. Students can free write their expressions or feelings of the Holocaust witness bearers. A letter can be written to a Holocaust survivor expressing similar feelings of fear that they share. In reading the text Night by Elie Wiesel, will be read in small groups with guided questions. Some students might feel the need to create a skit based on certain passages they feel strongly about.

Classroom Activities

Day 1:

Materials needed:

Newsprint

3 different color thick markers

Masking tape

Dictionary

Notebook/pen—students

Night book

Index cards with simple role-plays containing violation of rights in history.

(Rosa Parks, Little Rock Nine, etc)

Objective: Students will be able to identify and describe the characteristics of a witness or bystander in order to apply group agreed findings to characters/people who have impacted society and history with their actions or inactions.

Warm up: In five to seven sentences, describe a time you witnessed someone's rights being violated. How did it make you feel? You have 5 minutes.

“Turn to your left and explain to that person, what you witnessed and how it made you feel. Each of you will have 2 minutes. “ At the end of the time, 9-10 minutes, ask for 2-3 students share how they felt about the situation. Teachers will scatter/jot down on newsprint student ideas. Paper then posted to front board for future reference.

Direct Instruction: Define witness. How has history changed because of what other's saw? Post student ideas on newsprint. Why/why not did people speak up?

Independent Instruction: Break students into groups of 4-5 and give each group an index card with a scenario on it. Each group will decide who plays roles and others are bystanders in scene. Allow 10 minutes practice time. Each group will present skit to class.

Independent Practice: Find 3 places in the book *Night* where witnesses or bystanders were affected by the horrible situation they witnessed.

Exit Ticket: Think back to your role in the skit, how did you feel experiencing the hardship or watching the hardship? Name 2 emotions you can identify for a person in that same situation in reality. Could it be you or someone you know? Explain in 5 sentences.

HW: Watch the news or read the paper, reflect, in writing, about a situation in which a violation was committed and people reacted in a way you thought was not adequate. How would you have solved the situation?

Day 2:

Materials needed:

- Newsprint
- Thick markers
- Notebook/pen—students
- Night* book
- Markers/colored pencils
- Copy paper for drawing

Objective: Students will be to evaluate descriptive passages of text in order to visualize and synthesize the impact of surroundings impacting human emotions and motivation.

Warm up: Describe a time you were disillusioned at a situation that you witnessed. Disillusion means disappointed or dissatisfied. Each response will be 5-7 sentences.

Direct Instruction: Ask students to turn in the book to Wiesel's witnessing of hanging in the concentration camp passage of the "pipel", a child with a refined and beautiful face" (Wiesel, 60). Teacher reads passage slowly and deliberately. "For more than a half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying a slow agony under our eyes." (Wiesel, 62)

Independent Instruction: In groups no larger than 3, take turns to read next chapter aloud. Note points of bearing witness to the pain that happens in the concentration camps.

Independent Practice: Allow students to represent the image of the hangings from their minds. Students may use paper and pencil to sketch/draw the image or they might write a letter to the “pipel” family who were not captured and sent to a concentration camp explaining their emotion and feelings for the angel-faced boy.

Exit Ticket: Was there enough evidence to hang the 2 adults and child in full courtyard view? Explain your thoughts in 3-5 sentences.

HW: What gut wrenching movies have you seen that send a message that has stayed in your mind to this day? What was the movie and what was the message? Do you believe the message will ever leave you?

Day 3:

Materials needed:

- Newsprint
- 3 different color thick markers
- Masking tape
- Dictionary
- Notebook/pen—students
- Night* book
- Promethean Board
- Laptop with Internet access

Objective: Students will be able to compare and contrast knowledge of religious duty/clergy in order to evaluate the motivation of Father S. and other bystanders in the novel.

Warm up: Think of a time when you saw something that shocked you so much you were frozen to react to it. At what point did you feel able to respond appropriately or say something meaningful to someone about it? Use 7-10 sentences to recount the experience. You have 7 minutes.

Turn to the person on your right. Quickly share your experience. Pairs will have 3 minutes to share out.

Direct Instruction: In *Night*, we see the Elie Wiesel is a witness too much of the abuse and torture that happened. How would you define a “bystander”? The Miriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “a person who is standing near but not taking part in what is happening”.

Play video of Father S from 0:00-3:31 then stop. Ask class, “How would you react to what you saw? What is the advantage of speaking out? What is the disadvantage?”

Discuss. Continue to play Father S. from 3:32-3:58. Discuss the emotions Father S felt. Why was he more concerned about not having permission to look through the hole than actually seeing the machine guns?

Play the remainder of the Father S. video.4:01-7:20. Ask students to listen carefully to the regrets Father S. has.

Independent Instruction: On a sheet of paper, list the following statements. “Our station is where they handed them over.” (6:00), “I wish I could live my life—maybe I would be ready” (6:15), “I was utterly unprepared” (7:20). Students will randomly placed in groups of 3. Students will discuss in-group, what they felt Father S. meant. What do his thoughts mean in today’s world? Do they apply? How or how not? Groups will have 7 minutes to work on these questions. After 7 minutes, class comes together to discuss and process Father S. emotions and ideas. Teacher will write on newsprint as ideas are delivered.

Independent Practice: Go back through the book *Night*. With a post-it note, indicate where Elie Wiesel sees witnesses or bystanders on his journey. We will share out to start class the next day.

Exit Ticket: What message did Father S. share with you? What did he say that most affected you? In 5-7 sentences, share how Father S.’s ideas can change people’s behavior for the better.

HW: Look through the phone book/yellow pages. List 5 community organizations (name and description) that help people overcome situations they may have seen or experienced.

Day 4: (Some days have gone on an students are near the end of the book, *Night*)

Materials needed:

- Newsprint
- 3 different color thick markers
- Masking tape
- Dictionary
- Notebook/pen—students
- Night* book
- Promethean Board
- Laptop with Internet access

Objective: Students will be able to compare and contrast witness childhoods in order to predict the effects of World War II on their motivations as adults.

Warm up: How is your life similar to Elie Wiesel's before he was in the concentration camps? What is your favorite family memory or routine? Why does this memory stand out? Does the routine provide comfort? Why?

Direct Instruction: Introduce Paul D. who witnessed and barely escaped a concentration camp existence. At 2:23-3:09 in the video, Paul begins to share his rather normal childhood, "life was beautiful". He also explains his family, "dozens of cousins, my mother's family, my second father's family. Lots of aunts and uncles." Teacher can show personal photos to class. Children are very similar.

Paul D. witnesses at 5:55 people of the town being herded into trains and deported to concentration camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, he believes). He eventually makes it back to his grandfather (10:00) only to be collected and deported.

Independent Instruction: What does Paul D. mean when he says, "life was beautiful"? How might children of his age, (about 8) in urban neighborhoods, describe their lives today? Pair up with someone you have not worked with. The pairs will only have 5 minutes to conference and another 2 minutes to report out to class. Teacher posts ideas and responses on newsprint.

Independent Practice: Write a letter to the child that Paul D. was, trying to explain the chaos he was witnessing due to the state of the world? How would you start? It will be a semi-formal letter; a heading, salutation, body, and closing will be needed. The letter will be about five paragraphs long.

Exit Ticket: What signs of trauma did you see in the video of Paul D.? Do you think this is normal? How do people relay traumatic incidence in their lives?

HW: Research other cultural genocides that have happened in the world. How did countries react who were not directly related? Each item (3) should have a brief description and location of offense.

Day 5:

Materials needed:

- Newsprint
- Thick markers of different colors
- Notebook/pen—students
- Night* book
- Masking tape

Objective: Students will be able to analyze father/son relationships in order to examine how changes occur in family dynamics based on external circumstances.

Warm up: What events might make family members separate themselves from each other? Is that an easy thing to do? Why would individuals take part in that behavior and treat loved ones like strangers?

Direct Instruction: In *Night*, Elie and his father are moved to Buchenwald concentration camp. Read the last chapter aloud for emphasis. Look at how the relationship between Elie and his father has changed. When a point is seen, ask a student to approach the newsprint to write it down somewhere on the paper. The newsprint will be scattered with ideas at the end of the chapter. Use different colors for emphasis.

What is the last image Elie has of his father? Is that what most parents wishing for their children to see in the last hours of life? What emotions does Elie have upon finding his father has passed away and has been removed from the bunk overnight?

Independent Instruction: Show and discuss pictures of the liberation of concentration camps. Ask students to respond to pictures in 3-5 sentences each photo.

Independent Practice: What did Elie expect to see when he looked into the mirror upon being liberated from Buchenwald? Explain, "The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me." Who is "his"? What look still remains with Elie Wiesel to this day?

Exit Ticket: Choose an excerpt in the book *Night* that particularly moved you. What were your thoughts when we read it compared to your thoughts now? In 5 sentences, explain how your thoughts have changed.

HW: Share this story of survival with someone you care about. Explain, why as a people, we all must speak for people who are being persecuted or abused.

Annotated Bibliography/Works Cited/Resources

For teachers:

www.Facinghistory.org

This is an intense and full website with educational resources such as teaching strategies, publications, and resource collections. This site has professional development ideas, coaching ideas and tons of information for lesson planning for schools and school districts.

www.goodreads.com

An amazing site that offers up word of wisdom based on books. The pearls of wisdom may be used as class warm-up exercises or as class discussions to glean a deeper more thoughtful response from students. The site allows students to tackle the overall issue attached to the text.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>

This site has over 16,000 articles and 7,000 pictures of 6,000 years of Jewish history. It is a source of information about Jewish history, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Judaism. This site is a living library that is constantly being updated, changing, and expanding.

[Www.Holocaust-trc.org](http://www.Holocaust-trc.org)

The Holocaust teacher resource center is a site dedicated to the memory of the six million Jewish people slaughtered during the Nazi era. The Holocaust Education Foundation, Inc. sponsors the site, providing materials can be accessed and downloaded for class use.

www.hmh.org

A museum and resource for much of the Holocaust, this site was packed with history and rationale for why students need to understand why this event happened. The site has pictures and lesson plans. It is an actual working museum in Houston, Texas that can be visited daily. The museum sells Holocaust poem books, historical books Very informative.

www.library.yale.edu

The Yale University library houses the Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies. Housed here is over 10,000 hours of tape in over 4400 video taped interviews of witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust.

Miriam-Webster Dictionary. Springfield, Massachusetts. Miriam-Webster, Incorporated. 2004.

[Www.Scholastic.com](http://www.Scholastic.com)

This site is an amazing site with resource tools, strategies and ideas for topics of interest. This site indicates lexile scores for reader difficulty. This site also provides lesson plans for book titles and authors.

www.theholocaustexplained

This site states that it approves the teaching of the Holocaust for children aged 11-16. It has many pictures and much literature with links to definitions or point of interest. Interactive and informative, I found this site to be reinforcing ideas I found in other places. This is a site that can be used in a class on a white board and help guide a teacher lesson on the Holocaust.

<http://www.ushmm.org>

A most interesting site with railroad maps. This site was history based but easy to read and use. There are some teaching strategies but it was most helpful for background informational purposes.

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/videos.html>

This is a shortcut to the vast amount of testimony available at Yale University. The videos found here focus on bystanders or witness bearing of the terror experienced in the Holocaust.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York. Bantam Books. 1960.

This is a required reading in Philadelphia Public Schools for freshman English. The story told by Elie Wiesel, a teenager who must face the horrors of the Holocaust and question much of the world's humanity. As Wiesel endures and survives Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, his coming of age resonates to the core of urban youth in a fight for their own survival.

[Www.Yadvashem.org](http://www.Yadvashem.org)

This site claims to be the world's largest repository of information on the Holocaust. On this site, downloads in 12 languages can be accessed. Other useful resources include multimedia materials including the Shoah's victims name project in 10 languages and a database of Shoah victim's names. This site provides practical tools for teachers about the Holocaust.

For students:

Miriam-Webster Dictionary. Springfield, Massachusetts. Miriam-Webster,

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York. Bantam Books. 1960.

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question much of the world's humanity. As Wiesel endures and survives Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, his coming of age resonates to the core of urban youth in a fight for their own survival.

Appendix/Content Standards

Standards that this curriculum will focus on are:

--1.1 Learning and Reading Independently

1.1.1B---Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes.

1.1.1D—Identify, describe, evaluate, and synthesize the essential ideas in the text.

1.1.1G---Demonstrate *after reading* understanding and interpretation of both fiction and non-fiction text, including public domain.

1.1.1H—Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.

1.2. Reading Critically in All Content Areas

1.2.11A—Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas (maps)

1.2.11B—Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced

1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

1.3.11A—Read and understand works of literature

1.3.11E—Analyze how a scriptwriter's use of words creates tone and mood, and how choice of words advances the theme or purpose of the work (videos)

1.3.11F—Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama (videos)

1.4 Types of Writing

1.4.11A—Write short stories, poems, and plays

1.4.11B—Write complex informational pieces (e.g. research [papers, analyses, evaluations and essays])

1.4.11C—Write persuasive pieces

1.5 Quality of Writing

1.5.11A—Write with sharp, distinct focus

1.5.11B—Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic

1.5.11F—Edit writing using the conventions of language

1.6 Speaking and Listening

1.6.11A—Listen to each other

1.6.11B—Listen to selections of literature (fiction and/or nonfiction)

1.6.11D—Contribute to discussions

1.6.11E—Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations

1.6.11F—Use media for learning purposes (videos)