

2015 Letters About Literature Maryland Level 2 Winner

Dear Mr. Wiesel,

This year I read your book, *Night*, for my English class. I attend an all-girls Catholic school, so, as you might imagine, we get assigned a lot of “coming-of-age” books with the main character usually being a teenage girl. When I was assigned your book, I was surprised to find out that a teenage boy was the protagonist. Of course, I naturally wondered what a 2014 Catholic teenage girl in America could have in common with a 1941 Jewish Boy in Transylvania. It turns out we share more than you might think.

Early in your book, I realized how important your family was to you. One of your main missions while in the concentration camp was not only to survive, but also to remain with your father. You would find a way to be with him in the infirmary or keep him awake in the cold snowy weather so he would not freeze to death. In the end, you lost your father. Your father had been your will to live. Death was all around you. You saw babies thrown into flames, men marched into the crematoria, men and children hung right before your eyes. You saw death at a very young age.

Most teenagers ever see someone die right before their eyes. I have. I saw my brother die when I was only nine years old. I saw my brother, Joe, try to fight death just like your father tried to fight. His enemy was not the Germans but the quieter enemy eating away inside him, leukemia. Your book helped me understand some of the things that happened during his hospitalization. For example, my parents would have the whole family attend Mass in the hospital’s chapel then grab food from the cafeteria to eat in my brother’s hospital room. Despite the horrible disinfectant smells and gloomy décor, we would laugh so hard as we played board games until visiting hours were over. I now realize that it was important to my parents for us all to be together, regardless of where we were. Just as the concentration camps could not break your bond with your dad, so the leukemia could not stop us being a family. Those Saturdays nights kept us going through two and a half years of hospital stays.

You questioned how and why God was so powerful and almighty would let such terrible things happen. On Rosh Hashanah, you could not understand how fellow Jews would call God “Blessed.” I too wondered why God would let my brother die. He was so young and what could he have done to make God angry? Or was God punishing me or my parents? Surely my brother deserved one of those miracles that my books about saints had spoken of. I felt guilty asking these questions. Your words show me that maybe it is normal to wonder if God is present during hard times. Later, following Joe’s funeral, my parents, my other brother, and I continued to go to church. Why should I go and sing praises to Him? Hadn’t God abandoned me just like he had abandoned you? I understood why you refused to fast on Yom Kippur. My brother died on Ash Wednesday, and still in the Lenten weeks following his death, my mom refused to serve meat on Fridays. Why should I care about something so silly as not eating meat when God did not care to step in and cure my brother? Again you showed me that it is just part of being human to wonder about these things.

Despite all the confusion inside me, I think your words give me some peace. In your Nobel Prize acceptance speech, you spoke about how we cannot sit by and just let human beings endure suffering. You said that indifference is not acceptable and the only way to fight it is by taking action. Your words motivate me. Each May since my brother’s passing, I help at the Join for Joe Bone Marrow Swab Day at my school. At this event named for my brother, I help collect sample of cheek cells which can help

determine if a person is a good match to be a bone marrow donor for a victim of leukemia. Many girls are eager to sign up and hope to be a match. But I have also seen other girls, as well as faculty, try to sneak by the sign up table outside the cafeteria. They are indifferent. They do not know the suffering you and I have seen. They do not know that one person can make a difference. I will tell them. I will try to make them understand that these random victims of leukemia should not be forgotten. I know one person can make a difference because the Swab Day found a match last year for a 14-year old girl with leukemia. At age thirteen, I will fight ignorance with the hope of ending more human suffering. Though this is a small drive and we may only collect 100 swabs, *Night* makes me more committed to this cause.

You spoke in *Night* about how you will never forget the smells and sounds and the feelings in the concentration camp. I too shall never forget.

I will never forget the sad looks of the families in the elevator on the way to the pediatric oncology floor.

I will never forget the constant antiseptic smell at home as we tried to keep our house germ free.

I will never forget the stares by strangers at my brother who wore his blue baseball cap to cover his hairless head.

I will never forget the sick kids on the oncology floor who just wanted to go to school and be like all the other kids.

I will never forget these kids and their hope to live.

I will never forget my brother, Joe.

Sincerely,

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