The Character Quotient

Frank Shushok, Jr.
Dear faithful colleagues,

My friend Benjamin Sax, Jewish Scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, introduced me to the teachings of Holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and humanitarian, Elie Wiesel, with the gift of a signed copy of his book, Night. At the time, Ben was a faculty member on my own campus, and I treasured the way he reminded his students, and me, that moral courage is a good that higher education could and should instill in students.

In Night, Wiesel tells the unbearable but true story of the atrocities he suffered and witnessed in the Nazi concentration camps, Buchenwald and Auschwitz. He wrote:

Never shall I forget that first night in camp that turned my life into one long night. Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

What Wiesel endured was unthinkable, and he pledged his life to bearing witness—to looking at the evil instead of away from it and to giving voice in guttural protest. After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel pleaded for the world to never remain silent while humans suffer. Neutrality, he emphasized, only aids the oppressor, never the victim.

As I sat down to pen this editor’s note, I learned that Elie Wiesel had passed away at the age of 87. Writing about him seemed apropos, especially since Wiesel said that teaching was when he was the happiest. I suspect that Wiesel knew education, the kind that develops in us a sense of moral courage, virtue, and character, has a power even stronger than advocacy (or the absence of neutrality). Education has the power to eradicate both oppressors and victims. The learning environments we create on our own campuses have the same powerful potential.

When I imagine the Holocaust, I can’t help but ask: how could such a thing happen? Yet it didn’t just happen—it was instead the culmination of hundreds of small moments, behaviors, acts of intolerance, seeds of hatred, and cowardice that amplified until they birthed the worst humanity has ever inflicted upon itself. Similarly, love, justice, faith, temperance, courage, and hope manifest in small moments that collectively shape character in ways that set in motion waves of goodness. When I find myself being generous with a student, a moment of reflection will reveal that

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Those moments that murdered my god and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes. Never (p. 34).

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the wave in motion began with my teachers, neighbors, and friends whose generosity now flows through me. When I vote for temperance or courage or hope when all arrows point otherwise, I know books like Wiesel’s Night, Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, Maya Angelou’s I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings, and Shakespeare’s Coriolanus are influencing my soul. I know it is the voice of my friend Ben Sax (and others) that continues to whisper me into a new person. Character development is another thing that doesn’t just happen. Education, the kind made available through people, experiences, and texts committed to moral good, really does have the power to transform victims and oppressors.

The business of walking alongside students while confronting, in them and in us, the banal predisposition toward “tribal outsiders” is perhaps the highest calling of higher education. For this kind of shift to happen, character development, such as the “moral good,” must be our grandest aspiration. Else, our neutral stance as educators will likely be an incubator for new oppressors and new victims. As Wiesel counseled graduates in a Parade article:

There is divine beauty in learning just as there is human beauty in tolerance. To learn means to accept the postulate that life did not begin at my birth. Others have been here before me, and I walk in their footsteps. The books I have read were composed by generations of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, teachers and disciples. I am the sum total of their experiences, their quests. And so are you (p. 4–5).

In a time when our rhetoric and practice in higher education tilts more in the direction of skill development for well-compensated employment, will we also have the courage to prepare students to live life as human beings who care about injustice, fight oppression, and stand up for those on the margins? Higher education is a collective commitment comprised of the grandest hopes for a better world. What higher calling could there be than to bear witness to that?

With Hope,

Frank Shushok, Jr.
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NOTES

Wiesel, E. (1992, May 24). Have you learned the most important lesson of all? Parade Magazine.