

# Famous Speeches: Elie Wiesel's "The Perils of Indifference"

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Concentration camp survivor Elie Weisel (second from left) speaks beside German Chancellor Angela Merkel (left), U.S. President Barack Obama (right) and fellow survivor Bertrand Herz, after their tour of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany, June 5, 2009. Photo: Reuters/Larry Downing

*Editor's Note: On April 12, 1999, Elie Wiesel gave the following powerful speech. Wiesel is a Nobel prize winner and wrote the book "Night." The book is about Wiesel's experiences in the Holocaust. His speech was part of the Millennium Lecture Series, which President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton hosted. It was organized to show off inventive new ideas and creativity in American life. In his speech, Wiesel discusses his childhood. He talks about the hard times he faced. He warns against the dangers of ignoring problems like this at the beginning of a new century.*

Mr. President, Mrs. Clinton, members of Congress, Ambassador Holbrooke, Excellencies, friends:

Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian Mountains woke up. He was not far from the writer Goethe's beloved Weimar, in a place eternally known for its evil called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again. Set free a day earlier by American soldiers, he remembers their rage at what they saw. And even if he lives to be a very old

man, he will always be grateful to them for that rage. He will be grateful for their kindness. Though he did not understand their language, their eyes told him what he needed to know. They, too, would remember, and bear witness.

And now, I stand before you, Mr. President, Commander-in-Chief of the army that freed me, and tens of thousands of others. I am filled with a deep and lasting gratitude to the American people. "Gratitude" is a word that I cherish. Gratitude is what defines what makes a human being, human. And I am grateful to you, Hillary, or Mrs. Clinton, for what you said, and for what you are doing for children in the world, for the homeless, for the victims of injustice, the victims of their situation and society. And I thank all of you for being here.

We are on the threshold of a new century, a new millennium. What will the inheritance of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium? Surely it will be judged, and judged severely, in both moral and metaphysical terms. These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity. There have been two World Wars, countless wars between countries and their government, and the senseless chain of assassinations (Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, the president of Egypt, the prime minister of Israel). There has been horrible violence in Cambodia and Algeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo. There has been the inhumanity in Russia's forced labor camps and the tragedy of dropping the bomb on Hiroshima. And, on a different level, of course, the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka, which I know well. So much violence; so much indifference.

What is indifference? In terms of the history of the word, it means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and kindness, good and evil. What are its courses and inescapable results? Is it a way of thinking? Is there a way of thinking where indifference is fine? Can one possibly view indifference as a good quality? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to stay mentally healthy, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences violent changes?

Of course, indifference can be tempting. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and loss of hope. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor is not important. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible pain is of no interest. Indifference makes other people into something less than human.

Over there, behind the black gates of Auschwitz, the most tragic of all prisoners were the "Muselmänner," as they were called. Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lie on the ground, staring blankly into space, unaware of who or where they were — strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did not know it.

Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by our humanity then was not the worst thing. We felt that to be forgotten by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than one who did not care at all. For us to be ignored by God was a harsher punishment than to be a victim of His anger. Man can live far from God — not outside God. God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering.

In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great song. One does something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. You may even at times respond to hatred. You fight it. You publicly criticize it. You disarm it.

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy. It benefits the aggressor. It never benefits his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. Think of the political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees . Not to respond to their terrible condition, not to relieve their loneliness by offering them a spark of hope is to send them away from human memory. And in not seeing them as humans, we become less human, too.

Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment.

And this is one of the most important lessons of this ending century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

In the place that I come from, society was composed of three simple groups. There were the killers, the victims, and the bystanders. During the darkest of times, inside the ghettos and death camps, we felt abandoned, forgotten. All of us did. I'm glad that Mrs. Clinton mentioned that we are now remembering that event, that period. We are now in the Days of Remembrance.

And our only miserable comfort was that we believed that Auschwitz and Treblinka were closely guarded secrets. We believed that the leaders of other countries did not know what was going on behind those black gates and barbed wire. We thought that they had no knowledge of the war against the Jews that Hitler's armies and those who helped them waged as part of the war against the Allies. If they knew, we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to get involved. They would have spoken out with great anger and strong beliefs. They would have bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once.

And now we knew, we learned, we discovered that the Pentagon knew. The State Department knew. There was a highly respected president then, who was a great leader. And I say it with some sadness and pain, because, today is exactly 54 years marking his death. Franklin Delano Roosevelt died on April the 12th, 1945. So he is very much present to me and to us. No doubt, he was a great leader. He got American people and the world

to fight. He brought hundreds and thousands of brave soldiers in America to fight cruel governments, to fight dangerous ideas, to fight Hitler. And so many of the young people fell in battle. And, nevertheless, I must say that his image in Jewish history is flawed.

The depressing tale of the St. Louis is a case in point. Sixty years ago, the passengers on this ship, nearly 1,000 Jews, were sent back to Nazi Germany. And that happened after the Kristallnacht. This was the first wave of violence against the Jews in Germany. Hundreds of Jewish shops were destroyed. Jewish places of worship were burned. Thousands of people were put in concentration camps. And that ship, which was already in the shores of the United States, was sent back. I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help. Why didn't he allow these refugees to come to shore? A thousand people had come to America. It is the great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?

But then, there were human beings who cared about our tragedy. Those non-Jews, those Christians, that we call the "Righteous Gentiles," whose selfless acts of heroism saved the honor of their faith. Why were there so few of them? Why was there a greater effort to save SS murderers after the war than to save their victims during the war? Why did some of America's largest businesses continue to do business with Hitler's Germany until 1942? It has been suggested, and it was documented, that the Nazi soldiers could not have taken over parts of France without the oil they got from American businesses. How is one to explain their indifference?

And yet, my friends, good things have also happened in this painful century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil, the death of apartheid, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, the peace agreement in Ireland. And let us remember the meeting, filled with drama and emotion, between Rabin and Arafat that you, Mr. President, held in this very place. I was here and I will never forget it.

And then, of course, the decision the United States and NATO made together to send help to Kosovo and save those victims. Those refugees were uprooted by a man, whom I believe that because of his crimes, should be charged with crimes against humanity.

But this time, the world was not silent. This time, we do answer. This time, we get involved.

Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our experiences? Are we less insensitive to the pain of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far? Is today's justified intervention in Kosovo, led by you, Mr. President, a lasting warning that never again will the deportation, the terrorization of children and their parents, be allowed anywhere in the world? Will it stop other dangerous leaders in other lands from doing these things?

What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic. How could it not be? When adults make war, children die. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their cries? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, starvation.

Some of them, so many of them, could be saved.

And so, once again, I think of the young Jewish boy from the Carpathian Mountains. He has stayed with the old man I have become throughout these years of search and struggle. And together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by deeply felt fear and extraordinary hope.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the following sentence from the speech.

*Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by our humanity then was not the worst thing.*

Which of the following answer choices BEST represents the meaning of the phrase "rooted in" as used above?

- (A) growing with
- (B) connected to
- (C) supported by
- (D) stumbling over

- 2 Read the paragraph that begins with the following sentence.

*The depressing tale of the St. Louis is a case in point.*

Which of the following answer choices BEST describes the meaning of the word "depressing"?

- (A) making difficult
- (B) creating turmoil
- (C) causing sadness
- (D) being uncooperative

- 3 Which sentence from the speech BEST expresses the speaker's point of view about helping others?

- (A) Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor is not important.
- (B) One does something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses.
- (C) Not to respond to their terrible condition, not to relieve their loneliness by offering them a spark of hope is to send them away from human memory.
- (D) Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart.

4 Why does the speaker MOST LIKELY make the following statement?

*Some of them, so many of them, could be saved.*

- (A) to criticize listeners for causing harm to children
- (B) to cause listeners to be worried about the future
- (C) to encourage listeners to take action to help children
- (D) to remind listeners that the past could have turned out differently