Teaching Elie Wiesel's *Night:*

Workbook Questions and Critical Reflection Exercises

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Introduction

How The Workbook Relates To The Course

This compact workbook is meant to assist instructors who choose to use Elie Wiesel's *Night* as a text for Summer Reading Experiences and/or First Year Experience courses. In using Wiesel's text, your pedagogical challenge involves helping students to explore concepts, themes, historical antecedents, and subsequent developments that surround the Holocaust. By relying on the text, you hold in your hand a tangible way of broaching key questions to students that simultaneously: 1) cuts across numerous academic disciplines; 2) raises critical questions regarding the higher purposes of education; 3) engages students directly in a most complex and troubling situation by way of a compelling narrative; 4) raises profound questions regarding humanity in its entirety—without pretending that there are simple answers to those questions; and 5) provides a means to bridge theoretical (academic) knowledge and the concrete realities of life.

In choosing to use Wiesel's text, it will be helpful to remain mindful of the broader goals and issues of the particular course or program with which you are aligned as you seek to integrate the book with those objectives.

Critical Thinking, Critical Feeling, and Metacognition

In many instructor manuals, you have probably been asked to encourage students to engage in critical thinking. This strategy usually includes analyzing arguments, identifying underlying assumptions, and so on. But what does it mean to engage in critical feeling? Critical feeling concerns mindful attention to values, priorities, and meanings—aspects of life sometimes neglected in favor of more rational, analytical and "scientific" modes (see, e.g., the essay on using *Night* in a "Religion, Science and the Quest for Meaning" course). However, as the Holocaust reminds us, realities of life are not always logical or rational. In teaching his own work, for example, Wiesel began with this statement: "I hope that you will understand that which cannot be understood." It may be that intellectual analysis and critical thinking are necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, components of the type of deep understanding that Wiesel has in mind here. Indeed, even Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg, who is a recognized authority for his contributions to the literature on intelligence, now speaks of "wisdom" as distinct from knowledge. Throughout this course, an instructor would do well to keep in mind this distinction and to spur students to integrate these dual modes of engaging ideas. As the students struggle to do so, specifically in terms of relating the new understanding to their own selves, we may also add that metacognition (self-awareness) constitutes a key component of this class. Metacognition refers to becoming aware of one's own thinking and one's own reflecting—an awareness of the process itself, which leads to a "mindfulness" about life.

To the Student: How To Use This Workbook

Before you begin reading the book, contemplate what you are about to read, thinking about and making journal entries about such questions as these:

- Have you ever heard anything about this book or the author of this book?

- What does the title of the book evoke?

- What impression does the picture on the cover make?

- How does any information contained on the front or back of the book influence you?

- How does the fact that the book has been assigned influence you?

To get the most out of this experience, follow the steps below.

- Complete the assigned reading

- Critically read and think, taking notes on what interests or disturbs you; what you disagree with, want to challenge, or do not understand

- Complete the workbook pages—exercises and questions—and reflect further on your thoughts and feelings in response to the same in your journal

- Meet in class and participate fully in class discussion (critical listening and articulating)

- Write a journal entry that integrates your thoughts and feelings from the readings, the workbook pages, and the class discussion

- Collect all your completed workbook pages and journal entries in a folder or portfolio as a record of your ongoing experiencing

Make this class *meaningful to you*. This intellectual experience is a chance for you to take some time for yourself—time to ponder questions of great importance about yourself, your world, and your future. Remember, the more effort you put into this, the more you are likely to get out of it. Memorizing someone else's thoughts about Elie Wiesel, *Night*, and the Holocaust will not make any difference on you, or on your destiny.

Part 1
Night
By Elie Wiesel

Capturing your initial response: Critical thinking and critical feeling

Before you read

Before we even open a book, our minds begin to engage and to make assumptions. As you look at night, think about and make journal entries on the following: What images and emotions does the title evoke? Does the picture on the book make an impression on you, how so? Have you heard anything about *Night*, or its author Elie Wiesel? How does the fact that this book has been given to you as an assignment affect you before you begin reading?

Use these boxes to record the initial thoughts and reactions you will expand on in your journal.

In your journal, briefly describe your initial responses to reading *Night* for the first time. What thoughts went through your mind as you followed young Elie on his journey? What emotional responses did reading about his experiences provoke in you? You may include quotes and passages from the book to illustrate your point, or to illustrate how the author responded to specific experiences. Remember: Think in terms of both critical thinking and critical feeling.

What was your emotional reaction to the book? What did you first get out of reading the book?

Do you think other people can ever really understand what the author experienced in the concentration camp? If someone asked you to describe exactly what you think Elie Wiesel thought and felt while living in the camps, how would you do so?

What does it mean to "understand" another person, or to "understand" what another person is going through? What is it in life that allows us to "understand" others more completely and/or more accurately? Did reading *Night* help you to understand more about others, and/or about life?

Beyond initial response: The task of critical reflection

In your journal, and as you engage in class discussions, ponder Elie Wiesel's *Night* in terms of such questions as those raised below. Again, you may include quotes and passages from the book to illustrate your point or to illustrate ways in which you think the author would respond to these questions.

Elie Wiesel has stated, "My whole life, my whole work, has been devoted to questions, not to answers." Having read *Night*, formulate several questions that you think might be of paramount importance to Wiesel:

Wiesel opens *Night* with this sentence: "They called him Moshe the Beadle, as though he had never had a surname in his life" (1960: 1). With no surname, a problem especially within Judaism, Moshe's "Identity" is in question. As a writer, Wiesel often makes an explicit link between the first sentence and concluding sentence of a text. These are the two sentences that conclude *Night*: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (1960: 109). A major theme connects beginning to end: the drama of *identity*, as it plays itself out through a lived story. In this final sentence, it is Elie who looks into the mirror and *who does not recognize who it is looking back.* Having read his story, why do you think "identity" is such an issue for Wiesel? In considering your response, try to connect the issue to your own life: How do you define your own sense of identity? What parts of social life are key to your sense of identity? (e.g., Religious beliefs? Political beliefs? Groups with which you affiliate? Family values that you hold? And so on.)

Throughout the last few days of his father's life, Wiesel is tormented by the guilt he feels over his inability to help his father more than he does, and for secretly wanting to feed himself before feeding his father. During this time, Wiesel is told: "Every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else… Everyone lives and dies for himself alone." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? A popular rendition of the statement in our society is that every person should "pull himself up by his own bootstraps." To what extent do you agree with this statement? To what extent do you think many persons in our society adhere to this slogan or similar ones?

Wiesel painstakingly describes his experience of "loss"—the loss of his family, his homeland, his home, his childhood, and most significantly, his God. When a person is asked, "what makes life worth living," attachment to one or more of the elements Wiesel describes is often noted. What attachments/connections in life most contribute to your sense of meaning? How do you think you would react to the loss of one or more (or all) of these attachments? How is a person to find, discover, or create meaning in life after an experience of profound loss, as Wiesel experienced? (Or: is it even possible to do so)?
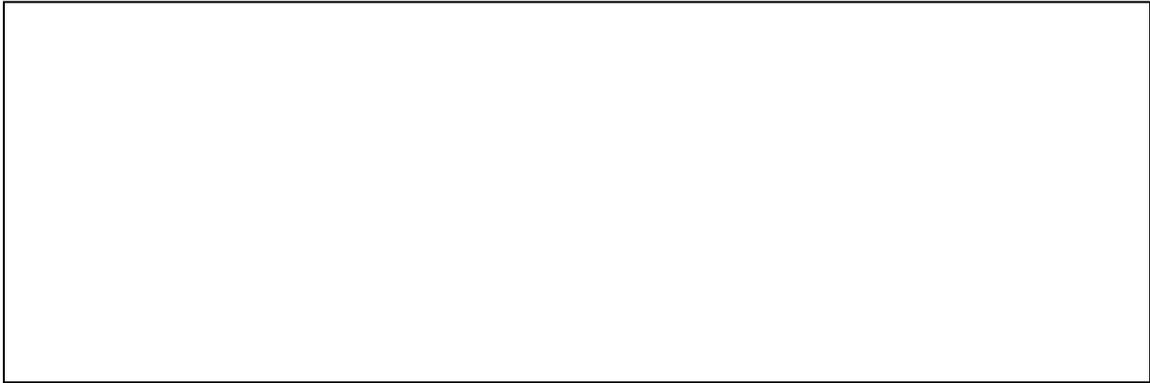
When reading Wiesel's experience of *Night* and reflecting on the massive devastation caused by Hitler's project, it is tempting to isolate the Holocaust—to cling to a blind hope that humanity "has come a long way since then," that humanity will affirm with one voice: "Never again."   In our college courses, however, we learn about Rwanda in the mid-1990's, of the mass graves found in Bosnia and Kosovo, of the *current* plight of the millions in Sudan who are starving, and of the current plight of millions of orphans and children around the world. What does it take for a person to become socially aware? To understand the world around her? Is it enough to read the newspaper or watch the news now and again?
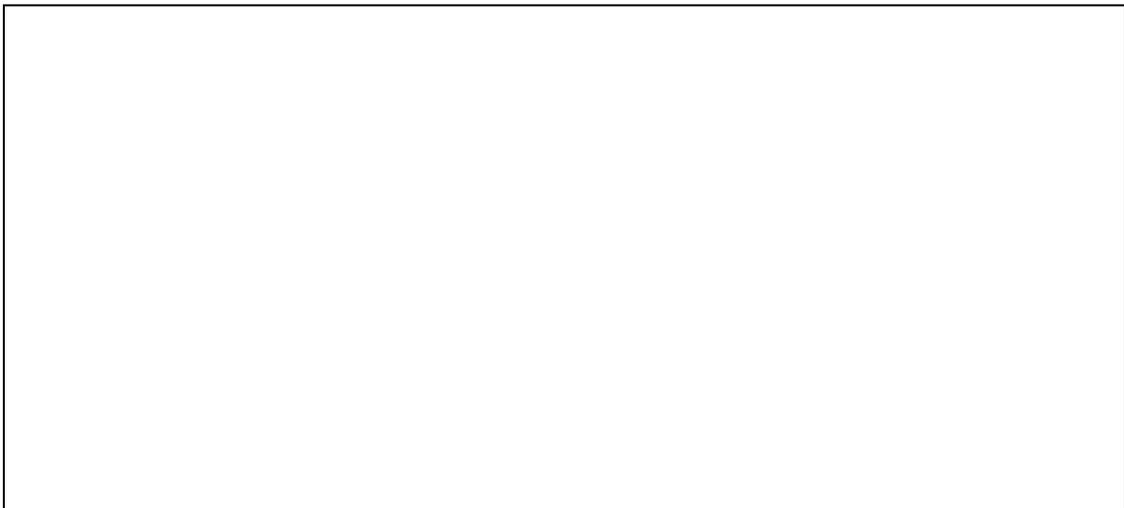
When studying the history of ideas, we learn that the European Enlightenment set us on a course wherein religion (based on "faith") has been supplanted by science (based on "reason" and "data"). Surely this should have led to an "intellectual enlightened humanity" completely incompatible with the Holocaust. Why did the modern, "scientific" age fail to prevent a Holocaust? Why did genocides continue even after our knowledge of Auschwitz? Is there some attribute(s) that individuals seem to be lacking that allows such massive devastation to continue? Put another way, do you see the Holocaust primarily in terms of a failure of reason? A failure of sufficient data? Or a failure of emotion/values?
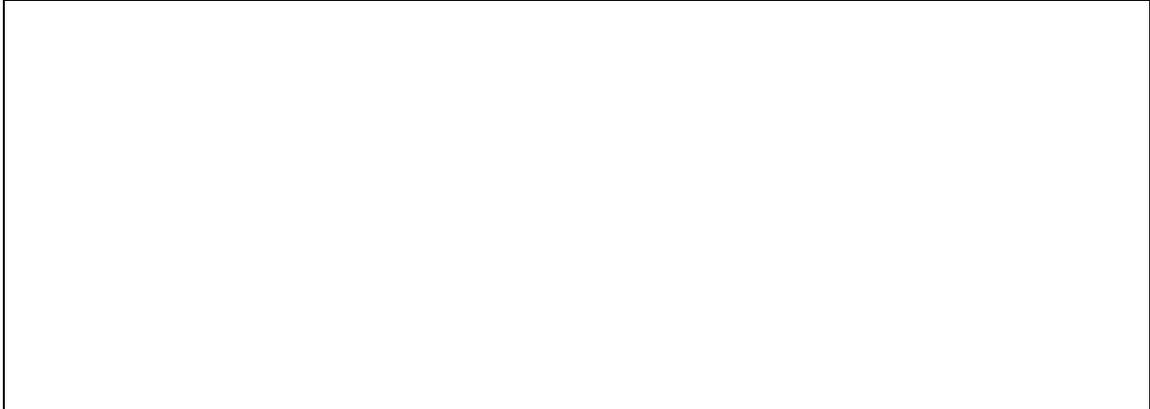
It has been said that the one belief most responsible for the bloodshed of countless individuals through history is this one: "Those who do not share my faith (or race or religion or political ideology) do not share my humanity; 'they' are different than 'us' and thus not 'human' in the same way we are."   What do think and feel about this way of looking at life and others? Why, do you think, does it seem so difficult to appreciate human differences? Do you think that this tendency is inborn, or do we learn to devalue the "other"? Does education play some role in reversing the tendency to devalue those who are different from me, from "my kind"? How does education (if it plays as role at all) make a difference in how we perceive and treat others?

Once a person reaches the "Those (others) are not (really) human" stage, it is quite easy to detest them—to hate them—and yet still perceive oneself as "good." In his discussions of the anatomy of hate, Elie Wiesel observes that anti-Semites hate all Jews—those that were born yesterday and those that will be born tomorrow; in hating all Jews they thus hate people whom they've never even met. So, asks Wiesel: "What do they hate when they hate, and whom do they hate when they hate?" Ultimately, Wiesel argues, this hatred is not only destructive, but self-destructive. Do you think hatred is both destructive and self-destructive? Why or why not? How do we come to hate certain groups? And once we give in to hate, how would we answer Wiesel's question: "What do you hate when you hate, and whom do you hate when you hate?"

You might wonder how the Nazis and other Germans could possibly have carried out the horrific acts demanded of them, even if they did in fact learn to hate the Jews. Some scholars would explain their collaboration in terms of "deindividuation:" a loss of individuality as one becomes submerged in the group, which leads to lessened self-awareness and weakened restraint against harmful acts. Can you think of instances when you experienced a reduced self-awareness due to membership in a cohesive group? Others scholars focus on the excuse given by many persons who went along with the horrific massacres: "I was only following orders." At what point do persons bear a responsibility for their own actions, even when ordered to commit an act by a "legitimate authority?"

Perhaps the concept of deindividuation can give partial understanding to why groups commit harmful acts, but what about the people lead others into this collaboration in acts of evil and hatred? Often we immediately think that something must be inherently "wrong" or "different" about someone who could mastermind such horrific acts. However, scholars often use the phrase "banality of evil" to indicate that, rather than being something extra ordinary, the propensity for evil is something ordinary and common place in human beings. Consider this: Adolf Hitler wanted to be a painter, but he could not gain admission to art school. How is it possible that this same man could have led the Holocaust? Is evil derived from inherent traits or life circumstances? What circumstances might have lead Hitler (or might lead any person) to commit acts of hatred?
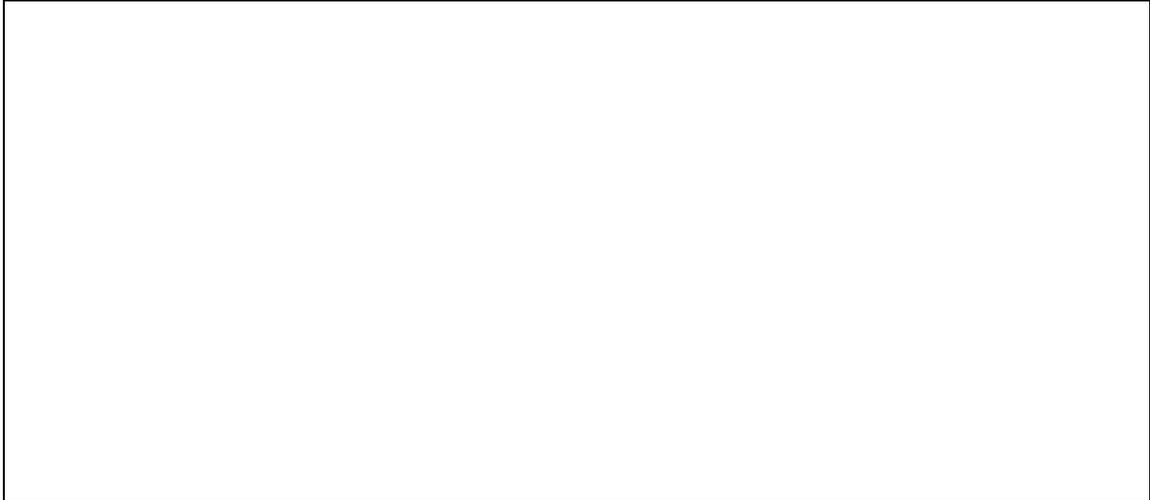
Assume that you were asked to write some questions or raise some issues about Night to be used in an informal discussion group. What questions or issues would you raise?

Where are you now? (This section is intended for use by students after they have read the text, participated in class discussions, and struggled with the prior questions and exercises via journal entry reflection and writing.)

How well do you think you would respond to the kind of experiences that Wiesel describes in the book?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Very poorly   Very well

What are your reasons for rating yourself this way?

Describe your own experiences (past or present) that relate to or illustrate any ideas, concepts or themes of the book. You may draw from any of the themes that you identified or that were suggested by class discussions and workbook activities, e.g.: Identity? Understanding? Loss? Harm inflicted by others, or on others? Hatred for a particular person or group? Triumph over a major adversity? Awareness of current world injustices?

Becoming the person you want to be and creating the type of world in which you wish to live: Do you think that there a role for education?

In reflecting on *Night*, list three specific things that you have learned regarding what kind of person you want to be.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

In reflecting on *Night*, list three specific things that you have learned regarding what kind of world you would like to inhabit.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

In reflecting on *Night*, list three current world events/news stories that you think have some specific connection to the events that Wiesel describes.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

In reflecting on *Night*, assume that you wanted to learn more about the Holocaust in order to "understand" it. What three university departments would you look to first to find courses most relevant to understanding?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Part 2
On Loss and Melancholy:
Wiesel's Night and the Eclipse of 1999
By Frost & Frost

In dealing with students directly (conversation) and indirectly (e.g., reading journals), I am constantly reminded that many of our students have already experienced "loss" in their own lives, or in the lives of persons close to them. In dealing with a personal loss, my wife and I relied on Elie Wiesel's life and work—personally and professionally. If the theme of loss is one that you wish to explore as part of your discussions, please feel free to make use of the following article (copy available on request from Chris Frost):

Frost, K.M., & Frost, C.J. 2002. On Loss and Melancholy: An Autobiographical Essay. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 7: 185-201.

Abstract

One of the dominant motifs by social scientists dealing with issues of loss assumes an upsetting of balance or equilibrium as central to the experience—an upsetting that is in need of "restoration." This article challenges that motif both theoretically and experientially, drawing on autobiographical narrative to navigate the complex terrain of irrevocable loss. Our story tells of the lives of our two children, Aristéa and Kade, and of Kade's death in the depths of a Romanian orphanage. We offer the concept of "melancholy" to suggest that the incongruity or pain that we feel, as a result of Kade's death and our simultaneous struggle to "save" Aristéa, can never be alleviated.

Part 3: Optional Text Reading
Man's Search for Meaning
By Viktor Frankl

Getting the main ideas: Critical thinking and critical feeling

For instructors and/or students wishing to read another account of the Holocaust "from the inside out," Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* is widely acclaimed. There are a number of differences that distinguish Frankl's account, in part due to such personal factors as these: Frankl was an adult and a professional (psychiatrist) when transported to the camps. He seems to rely more on "thinking" his way through the experience, as opposed to Wiesel's "descriptive/feeling" rendition, and he is intent on arguing that, even in the camps, one can find meaning to life. (Wiesel does not necessarily disagree, but note his reliance on "questions" rather than "answers.") Comparisons and contrasts between the two texts can be quite fruitful.

Do you believe that life is meaningful independently of the meaning that we create in our own lives, and independent of the things that just "happen to us?"

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Taking Stock: Where are you right now?

How meaningful would you say your life is at this moment?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Very meaningless   **Deeply meaningful**

What are your reasons for rating your life this way?

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To what or to whom are you answering in your life? (Who or what is primarily "in charge" of how you are living at present?)

The author quotes Nietzsche, who writes, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*." What is your "why" and how does it help you cope with the circumstances of your life?

The author recommends that you "live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now." What would that mean for you? How would you need to change your life to follow this advice? Can we learn from other people's mistakes, and if so, what role might education play in "living right the first time around?"

Choosing the person you want to be and creating a life of meaning.

In terms of this book, list three specific steps that you can take toward living a life of meaning. Specifically, address how you can make your life more meaningful through the three ways that the author discusses on page 133 and following.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Assume that you were asked to write some questions or raise some issues about *Man's Search for Meaning* to be used in an informal discussion group. What questions or issues would you raise?

Part 4
Elie Wiesel's **Night** *in Interdisciplinary Courses:*
An Integrative Approach
By Christopher Frost

Introduction

In the summer of 1999, my wife and I spent a substantial amount of time in Romanian orphanages; what we witnessed there would change our lives profoundly and permanently. Our journey began with a trip to the largest orphanage in the country, one that housed approximately 500 children ranging in age from a few days to five years. We were led first to a building on the grounds, "home" to about 60 children, the youngest having never known another facility save the hospital where they were born and abandoned. Our first glimpse of the children came when we entered a room of about 20 children—some strapped to a metal cage ("crib" by another name) to prevent a fall or jump onto the concrete floor. We saw other children so crippled by their isolation that they incessantly banged their head against a stone wall just to experience some feeling— any feeling—and others so resigned to confinement that they simply stared blankly into the empty distance. As our time in Romania marched on, we were to learn that the scene before us was not just an unfortunate lapse in an otherwise full and interactive day. Rather, these orphans spent every hour of every day in this state of neglect and monotony, with quick and rudimentary diaper changes and non-interactive feeding sessions the only salve.

Kathryn and I have always thought (and hoped) that, had we lived during the Holocaust, we would have been among those who risked their lives to save others in need. Now here we were: a moral morass staring us directly (and literally) in the face.

Were the images we witnessed real? How could this be, at a time heralded as "modern" and "enlightened" (or post-modern and post-enlightened)?

From that day forward, sharing my experiences in the orphanages of Romania (Wiesel's birthplace) provides an entrée into *Night*. Wiesel's life and work has profoundly affected my life experience and defined many of my life questions; the linkages between text and life are explicit and multiple. Such a union is important, because students thrive on explicit, integrative links between knowledge and life, but ironically seem to have little experience making such connections themselves. Carnegie Foundation reports on teaching and learning, for example, confirm what I have learned in two decades of life and teaching: Students routinely fail to make connections between knowledge learned in one academic discipline and knowledge learned in another, and between knowledge gained in the classroom and challenges faced in life (home, community, or workplace). To offer *Night* to students simply as a history text, or simply as another contribution to Holocaust literature, may take students only so far in connecting text to reality.

Making connections between knowledge and life becomes meaningful and explicit when instructors learn to draw upon the many disciplines integral to the encompassing questions that Wiesel's text suggests. For instance, I teach *Night* as part of an interdisciplinary course entitled, "Science, Religion and the Quest for Meaning." It is one of eight texts, with the other works rooted in science, literature, philosophy, existentialism and existential psychology, including: a book of essays on science and the future (Brockman 2002), the *Tao te Ching*, Robbins' popular novel, *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), and a book on the life and work of Simone Weil (Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998). In this course, we address a number of

imposing questions: 1) How are we to assess the damage done to religious faith by science in general, and social science in particular? 2) Are we consigned to a choice between naive acceptance of religious tradition—with the risk of living a "healthy illusion"—and a total rejection of any system of meaning that extends beyond confirmation of sensory experience—with the risk of living with an uneasy sense that "certainly there must be 'more' to life than 'this'?" 3) Has science led us to a more progressive epoch in terms of "the good life," or does the historical record of the 20th century suggest a continuous (or accelerating) record of an inhumane way of life?   4) How do we account for the continuing record of inhumanity, and how does one achieve a rich sense of life meaning in its midst?

One can readily see that no single discipline can claim sole proprietorship of such knotted questions as these. As we undertake a reading of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, then, we intentionally bring multiple lenses with which to see what is there.

Identity: Personal Grounding of the Interdisciplinary Motif

We cross the threshold of Wiesel's *Night* at the opening sentence: "They called him Moshe the Beadle, as though he had never had a surname in his life" (1960: 1). With no surname, a problem especially within Judaism, Moshe's "Identity" is in question. Indeed, it is as if he—like Wiesel and the countless other children of *Night* who were transformed into orphans—now has no identity. As Wiesel later writes in *Legends of our Time*, "My first friend was an orphan. . . . [Now I know] we all belong to a generation of orphans. . . . Sometimes I wonder if he [the orphan] did not have my face, my fate perhaps, and if he was not already what I was about to become" (1968: 37). Recognizing Wiesel's penchant for linking the first sentence of a work to the last, I invite students to juxtapose Wiesel's opening words with the two sentences that conclude *Night*: "From

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the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (1960: 109). A major theme has been introduced: the drama of *identity*, as it plays itself out through lived a story.

The infusion of the identity theme at the outset of the course is not accidental. Identity as theme crosses multiple intellectual disciplines and perspectives and thus begs to be viewed through multiple lenses. Simultaneously, the concept of identity connects the central course theme, meaning, to the individual that seeks meaning: A sense of personal identity and a perception of life meaning are knotted together, a connection that I unveil by sharing my experiences in Romanian orphanages. When we consider that many students are of an age that, developmentally, demands a struggle with identity tasks, then introduction of this theme is even more compelling. *Night* recounts the experience of a teenager, and the lived story may gain power when read by those in or close to the throes of that life chapter.

By juxtaposition of passages, we enter *Night* by way of the end (just as, historically, much of the world learned of Auschwitz and other camps only after their liberation). I ask students first to note that it is the corpse that looks back. Does this mean that Wiesel sees a part of himself (perhaps the most noble part) as "dead?" What part of one's self, one's identity, can die? Under what circumstances? With what consequences for life thereafter, and with what impact on our quest for meaning in life? Is there a scientific, an empirical, solution to the puzzle? Or do we unravel such matters by a more intangible path of value—framed by faith?

As complex as these questions are, the issue becomes knottier when students consider another version of the ending that Wiesel might have chosen: the impulse to shatter the mirror. This alternative rendering would put other enigmas before us. Were

Wiesel to act on the impulse, is it the *mirror* that is shattered?   Or is it the *image* in the

mirror that is shattered? Must an identity that has been externally (*artificially*) forced

upon a person by the Nazis be shattered in order to re-construct the pieces into a whole

(i.e., that is *real*)? In deciding between these interpretive readings of the text, we need

confront directly the elusive issue of identity.

The Puzzle of Identity and the Jigsaw Classroom

It is at this point that I bring an interdisciplinary frame to bear by using the jigsaw

technique.   The class is broken into four or five smaller groups. Each group is responsi-

ble for researching one piece of the identity puzzle from a particular disciplinary

perspective and by employing the essential concepts of that discipline. At a future,

appointed time, each group will presents its particular piece (15-20 minute duration).

Then, for the remainder of that class (and continuing to subsequent sessions as time

allows), we attempt to put together the conceptual pieces and arrive at a patterned whole.

A wide range of disciplines may contribute to assembling the puzzle and

understanding the pattern, although with *Night* I generally rely on the following. First,

one group examines the religious component in general, and Hasidism in particular.

Because I try to use concise, succinct sources (the class reading load is already a heavy

one), a simple but adequate choice is the "Hasidism" entry of *Encyclopedia Judaica*:

"Basic Hasidic philosophy is [characterized by] *hitlahavut*, 'burning enthusiasm,' in

which the soul is aflame with ardor for God *whose presence is everywhere. . .*" (*EJ*:

1394*ff*). I encourage students to explore Hasidism in terms of its distinguishing features

—charismatic leadership, ecstatic prayer, and panentheism—and within the broader

context of Jewish mysticism (e.g., Scholem 1946).   In teaching his own work, for

example, Wiesel acknowledged that "*Night* is actually a work in Kabala literature" (*Literature of Memory* 1980).

A second group takes on a literary perspective, examining dimensions of Wiesel's identity by either exploring the role that a particular body of Judaic literature plays in defining Hasidism —speculative literature, expository pamphlets, and most importantly, tales and legends (story), or examining the issue of identity in literature as a whole. They then bring this literary perspective to bear on *Night*. For example, Wiesel has said that Night is also "a story of the son sacrificing the father," a reversal of the Biblical story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (*Literature of Memory* 1980). "Don't give your ration of bread and soup to your old father. There's nothing you can do for him. And you're killing yourself" (1960: 105). Both paths that the literary group can take lead to a common destination: providing a crucial puzzle piece awaiting correct fitting into the (identity) whole. And both paths can be connected to a key facet of Wiesel's identity: He describes himself as a storyteller.

A third group explores the historical/political dimensions essential to understanding *Night*. They may pragmatically narrow the focus to the conclusion of World War I, the Versailles Treaty, and the interval between the World Wars. They often analyze the historical literature that attempts to document the escalation of Nazi persecution from the organized gang violence of Cristalnacht into Hitler's "Final Solution." In pursuing this line of investigation, the historical group begins at a crucial focal point: the knowledge that Wiesel originally proposed to title his work *And the World was Silent*. "How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true" (1960: 30).

In addition to the information regarding the original title and relevant quotations from *Night*, I also share with this group a historical incident and a statement from another of Wiesel's works: "At the risk of offending, it must be emphasized that the victims suffered more, and more profoundly, from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner. The cruelty of the enemy would have been incapable of breaking the prisoner; it was the silence of those he believed to be his friends—cruelty more cowardly, more subtle—which broke his heart" (Wiesel 1968: 229). The incident stems from a visit to the White House in the late 1970's, when President Carter offered some reconnaissance photos of the concentration camps to Wiesel as a gift. Wiesel turned the photographs over and saw that their dates preceded the Nazi incursions into Eastern Europe and Sighet (Romania). Wiesel declined to accept the photographs at this moment, countering that he and his community really needed the photographs in late 1943, or early 1944. (The Nazis did not enter Sighet until spring of 1944). Heartbroken, Wiesel asked President Carter why the allied forces, incontrovertible proof of the camps in hand, did not simply bomb the railroad tracks leading to the camps? Questions of this sort link the past and the present to the original title of the work.

Some students have connected this theme to other historical events in which the indifferent onlookers played a part. Martin Luther King wrote of the "regrettable conclusion" at which he arrived while confined to his Birmingham jail cell: It was not the White Men's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner that stood in the way of the progress for Blacks; rather, it was the general public, more concerned with maintaining the status quo, who served as the grossest stumbling block. Students begin to clearly see how these historical patterns continue to thrive in and out of various epochs and consider the impact of such behavior on issues of identity and meaning. And least there be any doubt

concerning human myopia, we return to our discussion of the Romanian orphanages, *now*, in the 21st century; to the condition of millions of children around the world, *now*; to the Sudan, *now*.

A fourth group explores the psychological dimensions of identity, drawing on a rich, extensive literature on the development of the self. Though there are numerous angles to explore with the psychological dimension, I introduce one with which I—and all too many of our students—are familiar: loss. How does intense suffering ensuing from loss affect one's sense of identity, one's sense of self, and one's quest for meaning in life? In attempting to isolate why experiences of *loss* "hurt," psychologists often resort to a homeostatic ("equilibrium" or "balance") explanation: Loss—whether personal, tangible, or symbolic—creates a gap between what persons have, want, or expect in life and what they now (at the perceptual moment of loss) get out of life. Basically, the logic is this: To perceive oneself as helpless in the face of events is to perceive a gap between the challenges of life and one's abilities and resources to meet those challenges success-fully. A major problem with equilibrium models, however, is that they assume that a person can always return to a balanced state. Is this assumption correct? To explore incongruity models (and this very pointed question) in reference to Wiesel and *Night* is incredibly illuminating. A psychological reading of *Night* brings us to the essential insight that certain life events occur such that balance may never be restored completely. In such circumstances, "melancholy" (an accurate, though saddening, perception of a life domain) may be the only appropriate response with a view to survival. The greater the gap between perceived opposites (like Hasidic fervor and friendship versus Holocaust horror), the more intense the struggle with melancholy.

By grounding life in the crucible of the concentration camp, one can see clearly that incongruity is not merely a cognitive dilemma or cognitive distortion in need of "correction" or amenable to "simple restoration of personal balance." While psychologists generally consider incongruity a negative state of being inevitably in need of correction, the life and writing of Wiesel suggests that there are certain life experiences that are both tragic and incongruous. In such cases, an authentic and accurate perception (and indelible memory) of the event is required even though it means sustaining the very incongruity that psychologists maintain must be avoided; that is, even though it entails melancholy.

Because such identity psychologists as Erik Erikson recognized the crucial role of life context in the formation of identity, students from this fourth group see that information from the religious, literary, and historical/political groups will inform their work as well. And yet, that is precisely the point: When the groups are later brought together to communicate their particular pieces of the puzzle, the excitement that is created as the pieces begin to mesh into a more integrated whole is palpable.   Prior to assembling the puzzle, however, students must fully realize the importance and role of each individual piece.   Just as the breadth of disciplines selected can be tailored according to instructor and to course (we could add sociology, philosophy, theology, economics, technology and more in approaching *Night*), so can the depth.

As we see in *Night*, to avoid melancholy by giving way to false optimism can be a most dangerous path to tread: "At dawn, there was nothing left of this melancholy. We felt as though we were on holiday. People were saying: 'Who knows? Perhaps we are being deported for our own good'" (1960: 18). By the end of the story, however, we learn that we must be willing to look into the mirror and see accurately what is reflected

therein. As Wiesel is to write later: "[T]ruth. . . must be sought. That's all. Assuming it is concealed in melancholy, is that any reason to seek elsewhere" (Wiesel 1972: 240)?

Assembling the Pieces: Coherence of a Gestalt

The oft-misquoted gestalt psychologists did not say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To the contrary, they argued that it is *not* that the whole is greater than the sum, but that the whole is *different than* the sum of the parts. These researchers were trying to bring us an understanding of the *qualitative* dimensions of human perception, a critical distinction as well for the interdisciplinary inquirer and the inter-disciplinary instructor. You can have students hear a lecture from multiple perspectives or read assignments from different disciplines, but those multi-disciplinary sources do not come together on their own. For integration to occur, we must bring those pieces together and struggle to arrange them until a pattern begins to emerge of its own accord—until the assemblage of pieces coheres with such elegance that they meld into a gestalt (pattern) where individual components are scarcely noticed.

How is this coherence achieved? In my view, we integrate pieces by way of honest and open-ended *exploration*, dialogue, and debate. Freud provides an apt metaphor that might clarify here. He argued that the relationship between patient and analyst (and, by analogy, student and teacher) is similar to that between a mountaineering guide and an explorer. To wit, when exploring a previously unknown place, the guide—though never having been to these exact mountains or faced these exact challenges—nonetheless brings his expertise to bear in such a way as to increase the likelihood of a successful expedition. The explorer determines the place to be explored and the nature of the expedition. The two together, by combining their willingness and expertise on a shared quest, discover something previously unknown to either.

In the classroom, no one, including the teacher, knows what pattern will finally emerge, or when; no algorithm for coherence (or meaning) in life exists. The best pedagogical method I have found is to follow the group presentation series with a discussion of the unifying theme (identity, in this case) and to move as carefully and critically as possible among the group insights and *Night*. Even the form of the group insights cannot be specified in advance: Although the use of language, of discourse, is a most common form, I have witnessed presentations that incorporate art, music, graphic imagery, film, and poetry to astonishing effect.

In addition to seminar exploration, I make use of course journals and thought papers: Students are asked to reflect individually on the core texts in terms of their own lives. Thus, while working in jigsaw groups from a specific frame, students are also required to reflect on the ways in which the insights gained from *Night* (and subsequent dialogue) have informed their own understandings of identity. In this way, students explicitly integrate knowledge and their own lives. By the time that we search for some common understandings (tentative though they may be), we are engaged in an intricate conversational interplay between the text, the jigsaw presentations, and personal explorations stimulated by journal writing.

As our conversation deepens and we progressively refine our understanding of the theme of identity embedded in *Night*, I also strive (as instructor) to connect this discussion to broader course issues: the nexus of religious faith and identity in juxtaposition to scientific portraits (natural and social science) of who we are; the knotty question of what constitutes "faith" versus "illusion" or "truth" versus "meaning," and the basis upon which we are to make such distinctions; and the overarching question of paths to a life of meaning. Having only explored one theme thus far, I can already report this result:

Students who participate in this class, in the reading of the text and journal writing, in the jigsaw groups, and in the integrative dialogue emerge changed. Having begun with the question of who was Moshe the Beadle and who was looking into (and from) the mirror, we reach the point of re-asking "who am I" (with a more seamless integration of the religious, literary, historical/political and psychological ingredients that define "self").

Night in Intellectual Context: Additional Texts in the Course

Before proceeding to a discussion of additional themes, it may be helpful to remember that *Night* is not the only text used in the "Science, Religion and the Quest for Meaning course." We rely not only on the multiple lenses of varying disciplines (including variant perspectives and concepts), but on multiple texts as well. While some of the texts cut across terrain not so far astray from *Night* (Frankl 1959, Fromm 1941, Frost and Bell-Metereau 1998), the readings that veer in a most decidedly different direction are those that view humanity through the prism of science (e.g., Brockman 2002).

To begin, try this thought experiment for yourself, and then suggest that students do the same: Ask anyone how the world might be better in fifty years, one hundred years, five hundred years, or another millennium, and ask them to elaborate on their answers. Almost assuredly, the answer somehow revolves around expected technological advances —almost never around imminent moral, social, or psychological improvements. In 1998, as the dawn of a new century and a new millennium drew near, I began work on a book concerned with "moral cruelty" (Hulsey and Frost 2004). At that time, ominous threats about the "Y2K" computer bug and its potential effect on world economies were forecast daily. New gene therapies for age-old diseases—and even talk of "solving" the problem of aging (and death) surfaced more prominently. Technological answers to our

oldest questions were announced, as we communicated effortlessly and instantly even with people we had never met—from around the world. Globalization of markets and the emergence of a worldwide market were heralded as proof of a world in transformation. "Most influential person" lists were proffered ad infinitum, as the "great man in history" paradigm continued to shape our view of collective destiny—with accommodation of a "great woman" contribution here and there.

In experiencing this collective hoopla, what captured my attention was defined by what had *failed* to snare *attention* as essential to the retrospection: the current status of human and social development as we prepared to enter the twenty-first century—the question of whether and how we had advanced as human beings. When we did enter the new millennium, my wife Kathryn and I did so in Bucharest, Romania. The grand "Y2K collapse" did not occur, even in Romania where little resources or effort had been devoted to the issue. The plight of the imprisoned orphans continued unabated—and virtually unnoticed.

The tendency to think of human progress in terms of scientific and technological prowess is reflected in such scholarly works as the text that I use in this class, *The Next Fifty Years: Science in the First Half of the Twenty-first Century*, and in such popular culture media as "Gattaca," "Star Trek," "Star Wars," and "The Matrix"—wherein the technology of weaponry has advanced, but the foibles of humanity appear all too familiar. In *The Next Fifty Years,* we read a wide range of scholars making predictions about the future, boldly proclaiming, for example, that with the technology of genetic engineering in hand, even happiness (and hence "meaningfulness"?) will soon be assured for every individual: Science will simply "make it so." It is after reading and reflecting on these scientific essays, watching the film "Gattaca," and viewing life through the

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scientific prism as carefully as possible, that we turn to Elie Wiesel and his memory of that first night.

Additional Themes in Night: Continuing the Connections

To the extent that salient features of the pedagogical structure of this interdisciplinary course are clear, it makes sense to continue the discussion by identifying additional themes around which the use of the text may be structured. Put another way, an instructor may adopt the seminar format and jigsaw technique, but also choose from a wide range of possible themes from which to build a virtually unlimited number of interdisciplinary courses. As I hope is evident in this essay, Wiesel's *Night* reflects every characteristic of the "ideal" text for an interdisciplinary course:

❑ The text readily lends itself to interdisciplinary analysis.

❑ The text is accessible to a wide range of students.

❑ The text is intellectually engaging and compelling.

❑ The text is firmly entrenched in the crucible of life.

❑ An extensive body of literature exists to support careful analysis of the text.

What additional themes emerge in *Night* as readily as the theme of identity? Loss? Language? Memory? Faith vs. reason? Madness? Mysticism? Individual versus collective? Aggression and violence? Power? Well-being? Human nature? Current events: 9/11? Middle East? Human destiny? Obedience to authority? Anatomy of hatred? "Moral" justifications of harm and cruelty (see Hulsey & Frost on "moral cruelty")? Although space limitations prevent me from developing additional themes to the same degree of specificity as with identity, let me at least offer some possible ways in which additional themes connect to *Night* and to the broader corpus of Wiesel's work.

Memory. The identification of memory as a key theme is accomplished by way of one of the most powerful narrative pieces in the book:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
> Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never" (1960: 32).

Although the writing itself conveys the potency of Wiesel's powerful declaration, I often play an audiotape of Wiesel himself reading this passage. Memory can be explored in terms of our initial theme, identity (both personal identity and collective identity), or examined as a separate theme in itself. A dialectical tension exists between the story-teller and memory.

Madness. As a psychologist, I am captivated by the way in which Elie Wiesel embeds this theme throughout the corpus of his work. He chose "night" as a symbol that contained and conveyed all other symbols, not only to represent the concentration camp as disappearance of all light, but also to suggest the additional implications of dreams, nightmares, and utterly surreal experience of life in the camps. "I still don't believe that it happened" (*Literature of Memory* 1980). In this sense, "night" conveys a tension between the real and the unreal, between sanity and madness. Again the centrality of the theme is evident by its infusion (implicitly, by way of character) into the first sentence: "They called him Moshe the Beadle" (1960: 1). As Wiesel declared, "Moshe was a real person, and he really was mad" (*Literature of Memory* 1980). In *Night*, after Moshe has

disappeared for several months and returned with stories of what he had seen, the people

of Sighet respond: "'Poor fellow. He's gone mad'" (1960: 5). And when Moshe's "mad

story" begins to unfold in reality, with the Jews of Sighet on a train headed for the camps,

the theme is repeated by way of Madame Schächter.

> Madame Schächter had gone out of her mind. . . . [She began to cry
> hysterically.]
> Fire! I can see a fire! I can see a fire! . . .
> Powerless to still our own anguish, we tried to console ourselves:
> 'She's mad, poor soul. . . .'
> [Later] we had reached a station. . . . 'Auschwitz' (1960: 22-24).
>
> Suddenly, we heard terrible screams:
> 'Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!'
> And as the train stopped, we saw this time that flames were gushing out of
> a tall chimney into the black sky (1960: 25).

What does Wiesel mean by madness? For one thing, he certainly challenges

humanity's view of sanity in the flickering, smoky torchlight of the camp. If those who

perpetrated the camps are considered "sane," then humanity must, by definition, be

"mad." In later writing on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, for example, Wiesel follows his

remarks of Eichmann's seemingly "ordinary nature" with this statement: "It occurred to

me that if he were sane, I should choose madness. It was he or I. For me, there could be

no common ground with him. We could not inhabit the same universe, nor be governed

by the same laws" (Wiesel 1965: 11).

Mysticism. A deeper level to the madness theme concerns not human madness,

but mystical madness. As mentioned above, a crucial context of Wiesel's work is the

broader literature of Jewish mysticism, the Kabala. An entire course could be construc-

ted around the theme of mysticism, featuring Wiesel's *Night* and his stories of the

Hasidic masters. In tying this theme to the religious perspective above, we can continue

with the *Encyclopedia Judaica* description of Hasidism: "The community of Hasidim

becomes a necessary condition for the individual's realization of the mystical experience.

. . . Mystical personality. . . grows dialectically out of otherwise disparate elements" (EJ:

1409). The potential richness of the general theme (mysticism) and the particular theme

(mystical madness) can be suggested, I hope, by way of a particularly compelling (if

enigmatic) story.

> "Once upon a time there was a king who knew that the next harvest would be cursed. Whosoever would eat from it would go mad. And so he ordered an enormous granary built and stored there all that remained from the last crop. He entrusted the key to his friend and this is what he told him: 'When my subjects and their king will have been struck with madness, you alone will have the right to enter the storehouse and eat uncontaminated food. Thus you will escape the malediction. But in exchange, your mission will be to cover the earth, going from country to country, from town to town, from one street to the other, from one man to the other, telling tales, ours—and you will shout, you will shout with all your might: Good people, do not forget! What is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget, do not forget!'"
>
> And the friend in question could not help but obey. He entered the legend with fiery shadows. And this legend encompasses all other legends. It is haunted by a creature that reigns over all others, and this creature is laughing, laughing and crying, laughing and singing, laughing and dreaming, laughing so as not to forget that he is alone and that the king is his friend, his friend gone mad—but the king, is he laughing too? That is the question that contains all the others and gives life to its own tale, always the same tale, the tale of a king and of his friend separated by madness and united by laughter, fire and night (Wiesel 1972: 202).

Concluding Remarks

The specific themes that I identify and rely on in my interdisciplinary courses

reflect, no doubt, my own sensibility. And yet that fact suggests the very potential of

using Wiesel's *Night* as a text in the interdisciplinary classroom: Different explorers will

discover different terrain and hence make distinct perceptual cuts into the text. We may

do so even within remarkably different pedagogical contexts. In my own case, for

instance, I incorporate *Night* into an introductory psychology course (indirectly), into an

Honors course entitled "The Anatomy of Hatred in Life, Literature and Art," into the Honors course discussed in this article ("Science, Religion and the Quest for Meaning"), into a graduate course entitled "Preventive Health and Psychological Well-being," and most recently, into my university's summer reading program and first year experience course. Although the objectives of the courses diverge, the accompanying texts differ, the intellectual context is different, and student backgrounds vary, in each instance student learning outcomes and student evaluations document the successful incorporation of *Night*.

Why is Wiesel's text so effective? First, and simply, because the text is real: Students engage with a slice of life from which there is no escape, and to which they immediately and naively respond by way of questions. How and why could the events depicted in *Night* have occurred? How am I, situated afar in time and space, to understand the Holocaust? The very asking of these questions unveils the need to approach the work from multiple perspectives. Once confronted with questions of "why," students naturally set sights on multiple intellectual domains—historical, sociological, religious, political, psychological, philosophical and more—as they ask questions and probe for answers to those questions. A second reason for the power of the text, then, is that it inherently requires readers to move beyond a one-dimensional frame.

Third, the text sustains the voice of its author, Elie Wiesel. As we strive for understanding, we cannot take refuge in abstract pronouncements, but must continually ground our search for understanding within the concrete reality of a single human being. As we attempt to do so, the potential for integration increases. Put another way, as we attempt intellectually to combine insights gleaned from a variety of perspectives, we seek to combine those insights into some pattern or configuration that makes sense, that

coheres, particularly from the vantage of the author. Thus, we are inevitably engaged in the task of connecting the concrete reality of a life with abstract ideas from multiple perspectives. The task of integration literally stares us in the face, so much so that we might reword the conclusion of *Night* as a conclusion for this essay: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at [Wiesel]" (1960: 109). Having now read and studied the text, what was it that Wiesel could see? And as I—concluding *Night*—turn my gaze back onto my self and my world, what do I now *see*?

For me, the image that I see as I move from *Night* to the world at present is all too clear and all too tangible: I see the face of an orphan, the little face of a baby that never makes it out of the darkness and into the light.

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Part 5
Putting It All Together

Looking back on the class

Looking back on what you have learned in this class thus far, what are the five most important themes to you?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

In your journal, summarize what you have learned thus far about

- Personal Identity
- Importance of Critical Thinking and Critical Feeling
- Life Meaning and our relationships to other people and to society
- Hatred, cruelty and inhumanity as barriers to a good life
- Role of education as it relates to these defining themes

Looking back on your life

Looking back on your life, what themes do you see? Up to this point, who have you been and how have you been living life? In your journal, answer these questions, using the ideas and terminology you have learned in this class. Be sure to include all of the following:

- Personal development, self-actualization, developing your full potential
- Education, work, career, leisure
- Relationships to peers, friends, spouse or significant other, family (parents and children)
- Engagement in society, affecting other people, affecting the future
- Religious or spiritual life, the deeper meaning of life

Part 6
Looking forward into your life

Looking forward into your life, envision the perfect life for yourself. In your journal, describe this life, including a timeline or a plan extending 5, 20, and 50 years from now— as well as your ideal physical location or environment. At these particular life intervals, who do you want to be? What do you want to have accomplished? For now, do not try to be realistic, but truly try to envision the "ideal" life—for you. Be specific, and be sure to include all of the following:

- Personal development, self-actualization, developing your full potential
- Education, work, career, leisure
- Relationships to peers, friends, spouse or significant other, family (parents and children)
- Engagement in society, affecting other people, affecting the future
- Achieving a deep sense of "meaning" in light of your other life choices

Evaluating your goals

Take a look at the goals you described in your journal entry. Are they generally in harmony or are any of them in conflict with each other? In your journal, describe how they might be in conflict. Be specific.

Evaluating your priorities in life

Evaluate your priorities in life. Make a list of the five most important things you want to do with your life. Be specific and concrete, even if your goals are abstract. Think about what will really make you happy. Give it a lot of thought. Now rank order your five goals below, thinking about how important each is to you. If you want to, you can give each goal a number from 1-10 depending on how important it is to you.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Part 7
Additional Resources

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