

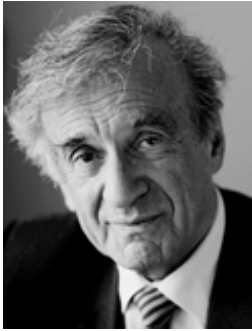
Wiesel at Wagner

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by Aimee Gonzalez

(cross-posted *at Wagner Today*)



Elie Wiesel, whom many consider to be the most articulate witness of the Holocaust and whose work, **Night**, has become a classic account of that time, visited New York University's Puck Building on April 12th with the **Reynolds Program in Social Entrepreneurship** and the **Wagner Graduate School of Public Service**. In light of his most recent publication, **An Ethical Compass**, and the general theme of social entrepreneurship Wiesel discussed **ethos**, and why we need it to advance society.

Speaking to a room filled with students, community members and faculty, Wiesel asked, "Where are we? With so many changes, convulsions, what is happening to the world? We need a historic compass," to situate and orient ourselves. That compass is ethos.

For Wiesel, ethos "is a choice between good and evil. How can we make such a distinction? First decide what is not good—anything involving humiliation of the other." He discussed Hitler and Stalin's use of their leadership position to preach an ethos that was not truly there—and was instead a way to justify millions of deaths. Wiesel reminded his audience that "the choice is always in our hands." He gives the example of the SS (Hitler's protection force that grew into a paramilitary organization), emphasizing that they had a choice. In fact, it was a voluntary position; no one should ever believe that they were coerced.

Given Wiesel's life story, references to Hitler and Nazi Germany are inevitable. However, he also defines ethos as generally "respect[ing] the other for whatever the other is." His childhood love for the others in his community, beggars and madmen, grew into the social activism he is well known for today. To illustrate this respect for the other, he gave the example of his visit to German President Johannes Rau, in which he pointed out that the one thing Germany had never done was to ask the Jewish people for forgiveness. In 2000, Rau flew to Israel and went before the Knesset, and **wrote letters to survivors**, asking for forgiveness.

Wiesel gave another example of his social activism, the mediation between the Minister of Apartheid in South Africa and Nelson Mandela. After many days of frustration, he "took them into a room and said, 'talk to each other.' That was the beginning of the end of apartheid."

His policy of respecting the “other” in others has earned Elie Wiesel recognition and reputation beyond his story of survival. Although he has written extensively about his experience, and especially **the challenge of writing about the Holocaust**, he has also been an activist on behalf of other humanitarian causes. (See, for example, this **2000 open letter of advice** to then-President Clinton regarding the situation in Sudan.) Wiesel has also established a **foundation** to combat injustice and indifference worldwide.

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